

Session 2:

Working with Young People with Diverse Social Identities



Description of the Activity

The second session started with a brief large-group discussion of the term social identity. Social identity refers to membership in groups that are defined by such socially-designated characteristics as race, ethnicity, sexual identity, class, religious affiliation, or age. Participants broke up into six pre-assigned discussion groups for an examination of the ways in which the Pathways model might—or might not—work for young people belonging to diverse social identity groups. Each discussion group included at least two young people, service providers, and staff members who acted as facilitators and as recorders.

In each group the facilitator distributed a worksheet to participants, and after making sure that everyone understood and was comfortable with the term social identity, asked them to reflect on their experiences with one or two social identity groups. One group member was designated to report out key points from the group after the breakout session finished. During the first ten minutes of the session, members wrote their responses to questions on the worksheet, and then reconvened to discuss their answers to each of four questions. Finally some key points were selected for the report out session. Notes were taken both at the individual breakout discussions and at the plenary report out session. Finally, recorders collected the worksheets from breakout session participants.

Question 1: *What are one or two social identity groups that you have contact with on a regular basis?*

Participants indicated that they worked with young people from social identity groups based on widely-recognized characteristics such as race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and religion. They also discussed groups of young people whose social identity was bound up in their involvement with service systems or their particular life circumstances. Finally, several groups discussed the reality of intersectionality in the lives of these young people, who frequently had intersecting membership in two or more social identity groups, each entailing challenges that become compounded.

Race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and religion. As participants shared their worksheet responses, they frequently reported that they worked with young people from diverse racial/ethnic groups. Groups that were mentioned repeatedly included: Latino, African American, Native American or indigenous people (including mention of specific tribal affiliations), and more generally, young people of color. Participants also had contact with diverse youth who identified as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, or two-spirit. Some group members also had experience working with young people who practiced Islam or were affiliated with the Latter Day Saints (LDS) faith.

Service system involvement or life circumstances. Diverse social identity also was ascribed to young people whose lives have been affected by involvement with service systems or support groups: foster care or other child welfare services; disability services; mental health services; substance abuse treatment or support; or the juvenile or adult justice system. Life circumstances also resulted in young people being members of disadvantaged social identity groups: veterans of military service; refugee populations;

undocumented immigrants; teen parents; young people who experienced poverty and homelessness; and gang members.

Intersectionality. Although participants were willing to discuss their work with specific social identity groups, some also pointed out that complexity may be hidden. A young person reminded members of his group that people are often put into social identity groups based on first impressions, but because of the nature of our society, there is no way around that. Individuals are often affected by more than one social identity group (a Latina teen parent needing mental health services), and this intersectionality makes it challenging to identify the most salient social identity group(s) for an individual. Participants pointed out that service providers also need to be open to young people's evolving social identities over time. Finally, several participants noted that some social identity groups were the target of marked stigmatization, either social stigma, through which they were targeted for discrimination based on group membership, or legal stigma, in which being involved with the legal system resulted in barriers to accessing services.

Question 2: *What intentional strategies would be effective with members of the specific social identity groups you are familiar with?*

Participants were generally comfortable with the practice strategies set out in the Pathways model, and revealed the ways in which approaches discussed in the model worked in their experience. Specific approaches discussed by the providers can be organized thematically according to the elements of the Pathways model: (a) provider draws on, and shares knowledge about resources; (b) provider conveys respect and appreciation for the young person; (c) provider shares knowledge about what it is like to navigate emerging adulthood; (d) youth practice driving their own

development; and (e) provider has knowledge about important contexts of the young person's life.

Provider draws on, and shares knowledge about resources. A youth advocate discussed the importance of really creating opportunities for young people, especially in the current economic climate, and providing these opportunities with true and genuine support. Success in the basics promotes building momentum in the right direction. For example, when a young person accesses accurate information about obtaining an ID and driver's license, and actually accomplishes this, it can be the first step toward securing employment. The Better Futures model of service for young people who are in foster care developed by Pathways RTC staff was discussed. The program employs a cohort model with a summer program, periodic workshops, and individual support for participating young people given by a mentor who has been successful as a young adult, after living in foster care. Better Futures provides resources for the young people to be successful, and to move into young adulthood by engaging in higher education.

Provider conveys respect and appreciation for the young person. Some participants focused on the individual characteristics of each person as constituting their identity. They are "unique, regardless of the label of diversity." They focused on the importance of taking each person individually, and "humbly inquiring as to who they are and what their needs are without using blanket labels that define them (African American, LGBTQ). Let our youth educate us about who they are." Providers should also foster a sense of pride and positive identity in the young people.

For young people with diverse sexual identities, and for homeless youth, the intentional strategy to be truly present and to create a non-judgmental environment not requiring change, is crucial in the experience of one service provider. She also

stated that peer support is vital for intentional strategies to succeed, so that members of these groups have contact with supportive people who have been in their situation, and know what they are going through. Young people who have a sexual identity that is divergent from that which is accepted in their community may have difficulty finding respect. Living in communities with local cultures built around religious values that do not accept LGBTQ youth can be very difficult for these young people, particularly when their own families do not support them and even disown them.

Young people may be helped by having a provider who shares some elements of their social identity. When emerging adults are part of a culture that is not shared by many, they may have few people that understand their mental health issues, and no provider that comes from their cultural group. For example, one participant shared examples of her work with Somali refugee populations who come from a culture that does not acknowledge mental health issues. It may be critical to find an ally from the elders or leaders of the community who is open to change or to the development of special supports. This will also require cultural responsiveness on the part of the provider who will need to reach out and learn about the culture and its values, beliefs, and customs, and begin by seeking common ground that can help to establish trust.

One participant talked about working with young adults with criminal backgrounds, and meeting them where they are. "If you are a step behind them, they think you don't care, and if you are a step ahead, they think you are pushing them too hard." Always, it is important to be strength-focused, and ask them what they are good at, what others think they are good at doing, and start from there.

Provider shares knowledge about what it is like to navigate emerging adulthood. Several participants talked about the importance

of near peers who can share lessons about moving into adulthood. A program director spoke about peer coaches who are further along in their development than the youth (with common experiences of foster care, disability services, cultural backgrounds, and/or sexual identity). Through strategic sharing of experiences, they can promote resilience. A service provider also pointed out that transparency is crucial for these relationships to work, including openness about systems' use of labels which the young person can accept or disregard. One service provider collaborates with a single mother with well-developed life skills who discusses "hot topics" with youth transitioning out of foster care. She also engages in experiential sessions with youth people, such as locating employment opportunities and completing job applications as part of her work using "in vivo" teaching. A youth advocate recommended that strategic disclosure of their own experience by service providers can teach youth the benefits and drawbacks of disclosure and lead to a new level of understanding.

Youth practice driving their own development. Service providers and youth agreed that for this to happen, the provider cannot lead the process. An experienced service provider suggested that it is important to check in with one's supervisor/team/colleagues to ensure that the young person is indeed leading the process. A youth advocate discussed the importance of youth being in charge of decisions regarding their lives, especially youth of color and youth in care. They need to get their power back! Several participants noted the necessity of building safety around the process of letting youth guide their own path to development.

Provider has knowledge about important contexts of the young person's life. For some African American youth, there is a greater need to pursue intentional strategies for engagement with circles of support. Engagement might require showing a humble and curious interest

in their background. This also means involving support networks which might not be their "faves"—like schools or system staff.

When young people have had traumatic experiences, either prior to, or in care, comprehensive trauma-informed services may be crucial. These services can assist young people to rebuild trust, to learn self-calming skills, for example through engagement in relaxation exercises, and to build a path toward their own development when their safety and wellness have been established.

Service providers can also make sure that they engage with the community, not just with the individuals from the community who are being served. Generally, for Native Americans, "join with" is a theme. Service providers need to establish a community-based effort, so that those being served grow together within their community and receive the informal supports that are available. A participant discussed the ways in which learning the native language of one's own tribe can serve as a protective factor for Native youth. Additionally Native Americans have been greatly affected by historical trauma, which needs to be acknowledged as culturally-appropriate services are planned and provided.

Question 3: What intentional strategies or pieces of an intervention would not work with the specific social identity groups you are familiar with?

Three aspects of the Pathways model did not work for specific social identity groups in the experience of participants. They involved the model's focus on assuming adult roles being used with specific cultural communities; developing empowerment when young people were involved in highly structured and constraining systems; and mobilizing supports from life contexts when the young person's social networks were not well developed or their communities were under-resourced.

Focus on adult roles may be inappropriate. Members of racial/ethnic groups that have a greater emphasis on collective responsibilities may push back on the principles of the Pathways model that focus on young adults needing assistance to transition to adult life. A social worker revealed that from her work with the Native American Youth Association programs, many young people have had adult responsibilities at a young age, and they may struggle with the conflict between independence that this model implies and the inter-dependence that is central to Native American communities.

Youth empowerment may be problematic given system involvement. When justice systems or foster care systems are involved, processes become “sticky.” Functioning as a “top down” system, the justice system can limit the choices available to young people. A program director discussed the difficulties of doing empowerment work within justice system constraints: Young people with experience in the justice system may not consider those without that experience to be peers, so finding peer advocates can be problematic. Finally, the provider needs to discuss consequences of system involvement with young people, and the youth need to weigh decisions in the context of the goals already set for them within the justice system.

When youth are served in mental health systems, they may develop their identity as embedded in the system. They can set goals in one system and not be able to accomplish those goals when they are moved to another part of the system, which occurs sometimes due to rules or controlling environments.

Service organizations that emphasize hierarchical positions push Native youth away and are not effective, according to several providers who work with these young people. Because of small numbers of Native youth in some communities, they may “fly under the radar,” and go unnoticed.

Mobilizing support available through life contexts can be difficult. Some participants pointed out that young people’s social networks may be fragmented or not present at all. For example, LGBTQ young people may have been rejected by their families, and may have to rebuild their social networks. Young people from LDS communities may not go on missions due to their mental illness, feel excluded from their communities, and have to find new social connections. Young people who are struggling with substance abuse issues may also have difficulty rebuilding their social networks. Providers may have to assist young people with development of their confidence so that they can rebuild social networks, and may suggest that they join with groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous that provide social support.

For young people living in rural contexts, opportunities may be limited. Many of them will be in communities with limited employment and widespread poverty. A participant noted, “Geography is essential.”

Question 4: *Are there any other strategies or pieces of an intervention that you think would work well with a particular social identity group?*

Both in small group meetings and in the general report out sessions, participants shared specific strategies that they had used successfully. Three examples involved using culturally-specific strategies, and an additional two examples pertained to work with system-involved young people.

Culturally-specific strategies. A peer support executive director offered some reflections on ways to overcome distrust of formal services on the part of young members of immigrant communities. As part of the activities of Youth MOVE Oregon, a leadership development curriculum was adapted for Spanish-speaking young people. Youth MOVE tried to offer this program three times, and it failed due to Latino youth’s

fear of engaging in formal services, and the fear of potential participants that they would be reported. Instead, Youth MOVE Oregon hired staff from the Latino community who offered the “de-branded” curriculum, with no formal connection with Youth MOVE. Later, when trust was established with young Latino community members, it was possible to slowly integrate the program with the Youth MOVE organization.

A youth advocate talked about the importance of providing an environment that is in the comfort zone of African American young men, who are very shaped by the time they get into programs (being “hard,” trained to fight). Those who work with these young men should recognize the fear they have of losing their cultural connections, and of experiencing violence if they choose to leave gangs. Eventually, they may need exposure to life outside their own neighborhoods, to set their personal goals higher than the goals of those in their current environments. “If you grow up in certain environments and see people struggle the whole time, you set your goals low.”

Culture must be understood in order to deliver services effectively. For example, when delivering services to Somali young women, a provider reported that she had to be aware that women are not expected to make decisions independently without the approval of men. When working with Somali young women, she would need to wait for a time when there were no men present to have the young person talk about what she needed and wanted, and what goals she chose for herself.

Strategies for system-involved young people. For young mothers who already have had years of involvement with systems, programs that provide informal supports may be more attractive and more helpful than formal systems. One program director spoke of successes through a drop-in center that is connected to a retail store, and that includes child care run by a peer support specialist working for a community non-profit.

For young people of color who have justice involvement, there needs to be cultural training that engages them with their home communities in a positive way. Providers need to counteract the negative identity of offender, and of being part of the inmate culture.

Other Themes from the Discussion

Outside of discussions of the Pathways model, three additional themes emerged during this session. Participants frequently mentioned the oppression that was present in the lives of young people with marginalized social identities. They also discussed the need for specific approaches to work with young people who have been diagnosed with certain conditions such as autism or other developmental disabilities, or psychosis. Finally, they discussed the importance of getting beyond silos, and coordinating services across systems to support young people with intersecting social identities.

Oppression may be a key aspect of the young people’s experience. This may take the form of structural barriers to opportunities. Participants indicated the importance of always keeping the social context of discrimination and racism in mind as we work with young people; these structural factors create barriers to service and produce economic disadvantage. Providers need to look at their own biases and teach young people about discrimination. They need to develop the skills to deal with bias as it occurs. Several participants commented on the oppression experienced by those who are labeled as having a disability, and the age oppression experienced by young people.

Specialized services. It was acknowledged that working with young people with developmental disabilities as well as mental health concerns may require specialized approaches. It is important for providers to avoid assumptions about people who have been diagnosed as having a disorder

on the autism spectrum; and to be adaptable and avoid normative assumptions. Strengths-based conversations may work well with youth affected by autism and other developmental disabilities, whereas peer groups might not be as helpful as for young people without dual diagnoses. Emerging adults with a psychosis diagnosis may be best served by strength-based work, which recognizes the heterogeneity within this group of young people. Some don't identify with the diagnosis, and may not wish to be involved in peer leadership groups. Others are not at a point in their lives where group work will be effective. A participant suggested that community-based work seems to work well when the provider helps young people to meet their personal needs.

Coordination of services. Young people with overlapping identities need to be served by organizations that have dismantled silos and built collaborative initiatives to serve them. Perhaps this is best done by knowing how systems can work together, and having knowledge of specific individuals that can be called on by the young people for help.

Reflections

Although there was strong support for the components of the model as effective when working with diverse youth, work must be based on in-depth knowledge of the young person as an individual. Participants were clear that for emerging adults, social identity is fluid, and service providers must be open to changes in young people's self-definition which can affect their goals and the types of supports that might be helpful.

The complexity of the contexts that surround young people with mental health difficulties may provide challenges for those who work to foster positive development and empowerment.

- Some of the complexities are bound up in social identities with which the young person is associated, and the acceptance or support

they find in their communities for members of these social identity groups. Our conversations about racial/ethnic identity groups gave evidence for the importance of culturally-appropriate services, and having service providers and peer support specialists who are members of these social groups.

- Resources for young people who identify as LGBTQI2-S vary dramatically between communities, as does their access to family and peer support. The presence of service providers who have walked in their path and flourished can be crucial for positive youth development.
- The topic of traumatic experiences that may have shaped the lives of young people was brought up repeatedly. These experiences may be associated with the historical, inter-generational trauma experienced by cultural groups such as African Americans and Native Americans, or with individual experiences such as combat or gang violence that are associated with social identities of veteran or gang member. For young people who have life paths shaped by trauma, participants were clear about the need to provide safe, secure environments where healing and growth could take place.
- Finally, there was a clear message about the difficulties that surround developing services for young people with multiple system involvement. Service providers clearly need to do the hard work of integrating services that pertain to the different systems involved in the emerging adult's life.

Practice models we develop most certainly must take into account the complexities of the social identities of young people and their contexts that have been unearthed through these conversations. Training for service providers needs to focus on the skills necessary to truly understand how young people see themselves, and on

knowledge of the social factors that impact their health and well-being. The training might help providers to become aware of their own biases, and to work to get beyond them. Training needs to address the oppression that young people may face due to their social identities, and the

structural barriers that limit their access to resources. In the final analysis, the path of young people to optimal development is shaped by their social contexts and the inclusion or exclusion they experience in their families, social networks, and communities.