



JOURNAL OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Bridging Research and Practice

Volume 11, Number 2, Fall 2016

Article 161102FA002

Where'd You Hear That? Examining the Importance of Individuals and Institutions in Providing Knowledge to At-Risk Adolescents about Their Local Community

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between individuals and institutions when providing information to at-risk youth. This research examined how community issues are translated to 302 at-risk youth participants in two community-based after school programs. It specifically sought to identify the individuals and institutions where adolescents self-reported that they receive information from about community issues and whether there were relationships between these two entities. At-risk youth self-reported learning about community issues from key individuals and institutional connections. Positive correlations were found between *all* of the individuals and institutions, which indicate youth receive information about their communities from multiple individuals and institution types. The results provide important implications for institutions and individuals to consider as they work with youth.

Introduction

Youth are malleable members of society who are, more importantly, motivated to be active participants in shaping their own developmental life course (Larson, 2006). They are shaped by the constructs of the institutions in which they are involved. The relationships that are created with people in the institutions shape an adolescent into the person that they will become within their society. Research has shown that programs that are available in the community can have a positive effect on adolescents (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008), but they can also negatively affect the adolescent (Borre & Kliewer, 2014). The information that adolescents receive comes from differing levels of the ecological system that youth navigate through on a daily basis (Arnett, 2012; Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis, & Cullen, 2014). This information comes from individuals (peers, siblings, parents, teachers, community leaders, and other adults) and institutions (schools, churches, community centers, community agencies, and community organizations). These institutions play a key role in the individuals' lives, whether the adolescents actively recognize this or not. The microsystems (activities and interactions within an individual's immediate surroundings) have a larger effect on the individual, but the macro-systems (greater society), meso-systems (relationships between entities), and exo-systems (indirect effects of society) consist of these institutions that play a role in an adolescent's life alongside the microsystems. Identifying key relationships between youth, individuals, and institutions is an imperative first step to understanding the potential effects of these relationships on adolescents in society.

Through the community programs that are offered, adolescents can learn valuable life skills that can propel them into a positive future. By being involved in affirmative microsystems, youth can gain and develop positive life skills by receiving solid information from their surrounding institutions. For example, Hansen, et al. (2003) stated that youth could advance their personal and interpersonal selves by being a part of a form of organized youth activities. On a personal level, adolescents can shape their identities through these activities. In turn, youth can develop initiatives, as well as emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. Adolescents can increase their goal setting, problem solving skills, and time management. Along with positive personal development, interpersonally an adolescent can advance their teamwork and social skills through organized activities. They establish interpersonal relationships and extended peer networks, as well as connections to adults that will mature their social capabilities (Hansen, et al., 2003). From youth based activities, adolescents can better self-regulate, reflect, strengthen social skills, and develop abilities to work with a team (Hansen, et al., 2003). Structure and involvement in these institutions allow youth to grow positively and be better prepared for the demands of society.

While Holt, et al. (2008) found an athletic team to be a positive influence on adolescents' life skills, negative experiences can also be obtained by being involved with a competitive team or group (Hansen, et al., 2003). These activities may lead to peer pressure and negative concepts related to "fitting in" (Hansen, et al., 2003). Institutions that have negative influences on adolescents are impactful. Not only do microsystems, such as the schools, programs, or teams within them, play a role in adolescent development, other institutions do contribute to positive youth development as youth navigate through these various institutions and interact with the individuals within those institutions on a daily basis. The family institution, which can be broken down into siblings and parents, also impacts adolescents' ideas about society. Borre & Kliewer (2014) point out that the family itself does not always control the influence that it has on the

adolescent as an institution. Borre & Kliwer (2014) also found that the macro-systems in which the family lives have an effect on the families influence, whether positive or negative, on the youth's life. One aspect of the community that can negatively affect families, especially parenting, is poverty (Borre & Kliwer, 2014). Any added strain or stressor to the life of the adult that comes from the macro-system can have a negative impact on the adolescent from that institution.

Partaking in risk behaviors has an effect on the relationships that youth build with local individuals and institutions. Loughlin (2012) points out that many different variables must be examined to determine why youth chose to abstain or participate in risky behaviors. Connections to these local entities may have a strong correlation to positive behavior. The Theory of the Social Bond, presented by Hirschi (1969) analyzes four characteristics related to connection: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Barlow & Kauzlarich, 2002). Attachment is the most important component of the social bond and strengthens the person's ties to individuals and institutions (Borg, 2015). Commitment deals with a person's rational decision making. Having a commitment forces an individual to "play by the rules" because they are dedicated to something that they are afraid to lose (Borg, 2015). An investment that an individual has put time into gives a perspective on what there is to gain and what there is to lose (Borg, 2015). This provides evidence to build on the idea that at-risk youth being connected to their community is a positive commitment. Involvement deals with the opportunity in which a youth can commit deviance or negative behavior (Borg, 2015). While this may seem illogical, the involvement that Hirschi identified was very unstructured. An unstructured environment has been shown to lead to negative outcomes (Evans, Gonella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005), but a community-based program might prove to do the opposite. When there is a community center that is invested in structured behavior for at-risk youth, there is a greater likelihood for positive behavior.

The final characteristic of the Theory of the Social Bond is belief. Belief confirms or denies the validity of the rules (Borg, 2015). If a person has been socialized to believe in the rules, they are more likely to follow the ones in which they believe. This can be related to the information that individuals and institutions provide to at-risk youth. If youth believe in the rules of the community, they are more likely to have positive behavior. Borg (2015) points out that ties to institutions inhibit individuals from acting on deviant motivations. Therefore, the stronger the connection with the community, the less likely the youth will commit a deviant act. Connection to one's community is essential for a positive lifestyle. The bonds created with individuals and institutions will only enhance the knowledge that at-risk youth have about their community.

Previous literature has examined how disadvantaged neighborhood systems have shown to lead to differing negative outcomes in adolescents. Social disorders, low academic standards, and violent behavior are some of the major issues that are generated from the context, culture, and connectedness of a neighborhood (Berg, Stewart, Brunson, & Simons, 2012; Rudolph, Stuart, Glass, & Marikangas, 2013; Whipple, Evans, Barry, & Maxwell, 2010). Negative outcomes in neighborhoods can be reduced slightly with the right neighborhood accommodations, such as community centers, which can provide security for adolescents growing up in a disorganized community (Kelly & Anderson, 2012). Adolescents overall view of themselves is also shaped by the people they are surrounded by or those who may not be present in their lives. Peers influence all adolescents. Their maternal figures, in conjunction with their paternal figure, also play a role in shaping their overall self, whether it is positively or negatively (Padilla-Walker &

Carlo 2007; Carlson, 2006). Adolescent's individual associations affect them exponentially. These outside associations also play a major role in the malleability of the adolescents' future based on their interactions and interpretation of community.

Rationale

Research is lacking in the area of *where* at-risk youth receive information about their community. Media has been analyzed on how it shapes at-risk adolescents' ideas of community and their community connectedness, but obtaining their knowledge from individuals and institutions has not yet been explored (Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis & Culen, 2014). Media was found to have a large impact on the at-risk adolescent individual, but the relationships of the at-risk adolescent and their personal individuals and institutions impact on community connectedness had not been closely examined (Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis & Culen, 2014). It has not been explored to determine whether or not there is a correlation between different entities within these specific individual and institutional groups. Specifically, do youth learn about their community from individuals that they encounter in their various environments, such as a coach; do they learn about community from spending time in larger institutions, such as in schools; or do they learn about community from specific individuals operating within specific institutions, such as a teacher during the school day. This connection is important to analyze because youth are receiving information about their community, and it is essential that what is learned has validity and is giving them a positive idea of their community. These connections are vital in understanding relationships between individuals and institutions and how these correlated parties and places transfer this important community-level information to at risk youth.

Methods

Data were collected over a five-year period through the *Youth Involved in Community Issues* survey (YICI) at two after-school programs in two different counties in Florida. This five-year study produced data that could be analyzed in differing ways such as: media educating youth about community issues, after school programs and self-esteem, neighborhood structure and adolescent resiliency, as well as future plans and community involvement. This specific study extends the spectrum of the validity of the data and adds to the areas of study that are lacking regarding the strength of relationships between at-risk youth, individuals, and institutions informing youth about their local community. In addition, this study analyzes these relationships and helps solidify their validity.

The purpose of this study was to explore where and from whom at-risk youth receive information about their local community, whether it is from specific individuals, institutions, or both. This study examined any connections between these two entities. Specifically, it sought to find out if at-risk youth get their information about community issues from individuals and institutions in order to further understanding of adolescents and their relationships with such individuals and institutions outside of the home. This research can lead to an effective way for practitioners to teach at-risk adolescents about their local community. It identifies where youth obtain their knowledge about their local community. As a result, individuals and institutions can better educate the youth of the community about the local issues that they are facing by delivering information through the most impactful relationships and locations. If the group in which the adolescents are most receptive to learning from is found, then the most effective

method can be used to translate community issues to at-risk youth. Knowing where the information that an at-risk adolescent is obtaining their knowledge from can positively help their community, as well as increase community connectedness for these vulnerable youth.

Significance of the Study

This study added to the findings of a prior study completed by Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis & Culen (2014) that examined how various media formats were used by youth for learning about community issues. The media study used linear regression analysis to find that media use for learning about community issues was a predictor of student's perceptions of community support, community connectedness, and community involvement. The media format most identified for gaining knowledge about community issues by the youth was the Internet. The most significant relationships were found between media use and perceptions of community overall, with the most significant gains in media use during year two, where youth knowledge of community issues increased (Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis & Culen, 2014).

Additionally, the researchers examined the importance of individuals identified by at-risk youth as providing information to them in specific locations. This included which categories of individuals were perceived by at-risk youth to have the most impact on their learning of community issues including: peers, siblings, parents, teachers, community leaders, and/or other adults. The study also examined the importance of institutions in which these individual's function including: school, church, community centers, community agencies, and/or community organizations. Further, this study examined relationships between individuals and institutions youth identify as being important to their learning about community issues. Therefore, this study shed light on by whom and where the most powerful impacts on learning about community issues were occurring.

Research Questions

The objective of this research was to analyze where at-risk adolescents were getting their information about community issues. While institutions give the broad idea of community issues, individuals give more specific and detailed accounts of the problems that go on in the at-risk adolescents' community. This study also assessed if the most influential individuals are operating in specific institutions (Individual-by-Institution). The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What individual types (peers, siblings, parents, teachers, community leaders, other adults) do at-risk youth self-report that they learn from about community issues?
- 2) What institution types (school, church, community centers, community agencies, and community organizations) do at-risk youth self-report that they learn about community issues?
- 3) Is there a significant relationship between the individual type and institution type identified by at-risk youth?

Based on the literature review and the goal of answering these questions, the researchers identified three hypotheses they estimate will be supported:

- 1) At-risk youth attending after-school programs are more positively impacted by some specific individual types than others regarding community issues.
- 2) At-risk youth attending after-school programs are more positively impacted by some

specific institutional types than others regarding community issues.

- 3) There is a significant relationship between specific types of individuals and specific types of institutions regarding from whom and where at risk youth gain knowledge about community issue. (Adolescent will report that there is a strong positive correlation between the individuals and institutions most commonly self-reported by at-risk youth.)

Expected Outcomes

The researchers expected to find the correlations between individuals and individuals, institutions and institutions, and individuals and institutions. A strong connection between the individual groups of Peers and Sibling as well as Parents and Teachers was hypothesized. In the case of the institutions, a strong correlation was predicted between School and Church, as well as, Community Centers and Church. Finally, a strong connection was hypothesized to appear between School and Teachers, Church and Parents, and Community Organizations and Other Adults.

Methods

This study was completed with data collected for five years and was conducted using information provided by the at-risk adolescents participating in the established grant-funded afterschool program (n=302). Surveys were administered to the participating at-risk youth once a year. The students were assigned a random number; resulting in a confidential study. In addition, the study is considered longitudinal because it traced the participants over a five-year time span.

The study examined where at-risk adolescents obtain their information about their community, specifically if it was from individuals or institutions. Data were collected via survey five times over a period of five years from two locations in Florida. The administered survey was the *Youth Involvement in Community Issues* (YICI) Survey. The participants in the survey were not randomly selected; they were all participating in a community-based after school program. In this quasi-experiment, correlations were conducted between different variables to find if there was a significant relationship. The dependent variable of this study is at-risk youth's knowledge about the community issues, while the independent variable is the individuals and institutions in which the at-risk youth get their information from about their community.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is that the survey constricted the individuals and institutions in which the at-risk youth can identify as getting their information from. Although this study does not touch on media, another analysis on this data was done concerning that information (Barnett, Neely, Payne-Purvis, Culen, 2014). Therefore, this study examined other variables that added to results previously obtained through other parts of the survey data analysis. This study is also limited because it is a convenience sample. The sample was taken from a voluntary population that was attending the afterschool program. Therefore, this information cannot be generalized back to the entire population of at-risk youth.

Demographics

The demographics section of the YICI survey consisted of nine questions regarding race/ethnicity, sex, age, and grade. These data were collected to establish a better understanding of the sample being studied. The 302 participating at-risk youth were first asked to identify their race/ethnicity / sex; their grade; and lastly, their age. These youth identified their ethnicity in the distribution as follows: 14 White (4.6%); 232 African American (76.8%); 42 Hispanic/Latino (13.9%); 3 Native American (.9%), and 9 other (2.9%). There were 148 males (49.1%) and 153 females (50.8%). The grade distribution of the sample was: fifth graders or below (10.9%); sixth graders (29.8%), seventh graders (24.5%), eighth graders (14.2%), ninth graders (10.6%), tenth graders (4.0%), eleventh graders (4.3%) and twelfth graders (1.7%). There were youth participants by the following ages: 11 years and younger (26; 8.6%), 12-13 year olds (141; 46.7%), 14-15 year olds (86; 28.5%), 16-17 year olds (26; 8.6%), and 18 years and older (23; 7.6%).

Data Collection

Researchers collected data from the two locations. Times were scheduled each year for the surveys to be distributed to the at-risk youth in the after school programs. Each participant in the survey was assigned an identification number so that his or her responses could be compared over the five years of participation in a program. Even though the participants were assigned an identification number, the surveys were kept confidential. Their participation was voluntary, and they were given the option to opt out of the study at any time.

Attendance

The afterschool program manager kept track of the attendance each day and each site kept records of the youth's attendance. From these records, the study was able to determine the consistency and frequency of attendance. This could play a role in the outcome of where at-risk youth receive their information about their community.

Instrumentation

The data collection method used was the *Youth Involvement in Community Issues Survey* (YICI) developed by Barnett, Payne-Purvis, and Culen (2009). The YICI survey was comprised of a total of 62 questions. The survey was broken down into six categories: demographics, you and your community, future plans, reasons involved in community, reasons not involved in community, and knowledge of community issues. This study focused on 11 of the 62 questions. These 11 questions fall under the section entitled *Knowledge of Community Issue* in the YICI survey. The questions were scored on a Likert scale from one to five. The scale consisted of the choices 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Disagree, 3) Undecided, 4) Agree, and 5) Strongly Agree. The section began with the statement "I learn about community issue from:" and is followed by the 11 questions that were used in this study. Those questions were broken down into two sections: individuals and institutions. The individual index consists of peers, siblings, parents, teachers, community leaders, and other adults. The institution index is made up of school, church, community centers, community agencies, and community organizations. These indexes are two parts of a three-part section asking at-risk youth where they learn about community issues.

Results

The participants were asked to indicate where they learn about community issues (crime, recycling, unemployment, safety, drugs, etc.). They were given a Likert scale ranging from 1-5 (1-Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Undecided, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree) to rate their attainment of information from individuals and institutions. The means ranged from the lowest, 3.288, classified as community leaders to the highest mean, 3.997, parents. The means and standard deviation are listed in the Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviation

I learn about community issues from:	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Peers	301	1.0	5.0	3.458	1.3889
Siblings	300	1.0	5.0	3.320	1.4736
Parents	302	1.0	5.0	3.997	1.2322
Teachers	301	1.0	5.0	3.694	1.3390
Community Leaders	299	1.0	5.0	3.288	1.3821
Other Adults	301	1.0	5.0	3.618	1.2975
School	301	1.0	5.0	3.781	1.2930
Church	300	1.0	5.0	3.800	1.2697
Community Centers	301	1.0	5.0	3.558	1.2835
Community Agency	301	1.0	5.0	3.492	1.4204
Community Organization	302	1.0	5.0	3.613	1.3415

In the following table (2.1), there is a significance level indicated by each of the values. This level of significance is represented with an asterisk (*). The values represented are the correlation between the individual and the institution. The correlation significance suggests it is statistically unlikely that the connection happened by chance. The numbers represented with one asterisk (*) there is less than 20% chance that that correlation could have happened by chance. Values marked with two asterisks (**) indicate there is less than a one in one hundred chance that that relationship is an accident. This level of significance is designated as highly significant.

Table 2.1
*Pearson Correlation *r* values correlating Individuals-by-Individuals*

I learn about community issues from:	Peers	Siblings	Parents	Teachers	Community leaders	Other Adults
Peers	1	-	-	-	=	-
Siblings	.613**	1	-	-	-	-
Parents	.488**	.514**	1	-	-	-
Teachers	.417*	.416**	.574**	1	-	-
Community Leaders	.279**	.327**	.365**	.452**	1	-
Other Adults	.406**	.348**	.478**	.518**	.390**	1

*Correlation is Significant at .05

** Correlation is Significant at .01

An Individual-by-Individual bivariate correlation was conducted to explore the relationship between all six individual types. There was a strong to moderate positive relationship found between Peers and Siblings, Peers and Parents, Peers and Teachers, Peers and Other Adults, Siblings and Parents, Siblings and Teachers, Parents and Teachers, Parents and Other Adults, Teachers and Community Leaders, and Teachers and Other Adults. The strongest relationship was found between Peers and Siblings (.613**). This relationship represents a strong positive correlation. The weakest relationship was proven to be between Peers and Community Leaders (.279**). This is defined as a weak correlation. This found evidence that there are relationships between different individual types when passing information to at-risk youth.

An Institution-by-Institution bivariate correlation was run to find relationships between the community institutions. There was a moderate positive relationship between School and Church, School and Community Organizations, Church and Community Centers, Church and Community Agencies, Church and Community Organizations, and Community Centers and Community Agencies. The correlation between Community Organizations and Community Centers had the highest correlation (.639**) and represents a strong positive correlation. The Community Church was shown to have the strongest average overall positive correlation with all the other institutions; therefore, churches appear to provide the most information about community issues to at-risk adolescents. All of the correlations with churches are moderately positive.

Table 2.2

Pearson Correlation r values correlating Institutions-by-Institutions

I learn about community issues from:	School	Church	Community Centers	Community Agency	Community Organizations
School	1	-	-	-	-
Church	.566**	1	-	-	-
Community Centers	.381**	.569**	1	-	-
Community Agency	.361**	.505**	.571**	1	-
Community Organizations	.421**	.560**	.639**	.591**	1

*Correlation is Significant at .05

** Correlation is Significant at .01

Table 2.3

Pearson Correlation r values correlating Individuals-by-Institutions

I learn about community issues from:	School	Church	Community Centers	Community Agency	Community Organizations
Peers	.391**	.428**	.341**	.316**	.349**
Siblings	.339**	.414**	.300**	.306**	.321**
Parents	.420**	.507**	.373**	.421**	.464**
Teachers	.546**	.534**	.426**	.454**	.512**
Community Leaders	.333**	.366**	.381**	.592**	.479**
Other Adults	.439**	.499**	.461**	.375**	.534**

*Correlation is Significant at .05

** Correlation is Significant at .01

Individuals were correlated with institutions to examine whether a significant bivariate relationship exist. All of the relationships were positive and significant. The most significant relationships, in order, were between Community Agencies and Community Leaders (.592**), Church and Teachers (.534**), Schools and Teachers (.546**), and Community Organizations and Other Adults (.534**). All of these correlations are classified as moderately positive correlations. The lowest relationship was a weak correlation between individuals and institutions of Community Centers and Siblings (.300**). No matter what type of institution, the individuals within the institution are significantly impacting the knowledge about community issues that at-risk youth are receiving.

Discussion

The indicated findings suggest individuals and institutions are working together to provide information on community issues to at-risk youth. There are strong positive correlations between all the individuals and institutions. This suggests, for example, that while the teacher is providing information to the at-risk youth, so is the school overall, and together they are giving information about community issues to at-risk youth. This is represented in the results with the correlation between the institution of the school and the individual teacher, which is .456**. These findings demonstrate and provide information for the after school program, youth, policy, professionals in the field, and researchers of at-risk youth, youth development, and community development.

The after-school program is a Community Organization. This institution had the highest/strongest positive correlation with the individual type Other Adults. The other individuals can be classified as the youth care workers that conduct the after school program. This demonstrates that the individuals working in that institution are working together to provide information for the at-risk youth at the program. This correlation indicates that this program was successful in providing information on community issues to at risk youth.

As far as the youth are concerned, they are receiving information from the institutions that they participate in as well as the individuals in these institutions. The strong connection between these two entities means the information the at-risk youth receive will be communicated and reinforced at both an individual and institutional level. This gives the youth a solid foundation from which they obtain their information about community issues.

Policy makers can use this information to provide requirements for different institutions to ensure that the individuals within these institutions are qualified for their positions. Those serving in positions that youth look to for community information need to be knowledgeable, prepared, and able to provide youth with relevant, accurate details about the community. Where at-risk youth get their information from is very important because it can lead them in a positive direction. It can assist in removing them from being classified as at-risk. Policy informs how individuals and institutions can share information with youth and has the potential to maximize the positive impact this information can have, especially on at-risk youth in vulnerable communities.

From this research, professionals in the field can see that their impact on the information translated to at-risk youth through institutions is vital. At times, professionals working with

youth may question if the information they communicate is being heard and remembered. In short, when it comes to community knowledge, youth are listening. The information about community issues that they give to at-risk youth is being received and translated into their knowledge base. Consequently, professionals need to have a firm understanding and mastery of the knowledge they share with at-risk youth and make it a priority to educate these youth in regards to community issues. These practices can encourage youth to become active and responsible adult citizens later in life.

This study provides valid information about where youth receive their information from, but does not demonstrate how much at-risk youth learn from different individuals and institutions, rather, it implies where and from whom this information was transferred. It provided the correlations between individuals and institutions, but ultimately it does not indicate if these strong correlations provide the most knowledge about community issues to at-risk youth. Further research should be conducted to see how much at-risk youth learn from these individuals and institutions separately and how they are correlated as well.

Conclusion

This study surveyed 302 at-risk youth participating in a community-based afterschool program. The YICI survey created by Barnett, Payne-Purvis and Culen (2009) was administered to the at-risk youth once a year for five years. This secondary data were analyzed by correlations to determine if there were significant relationships between individuals and institutions in providing information about community issues to the at-risk youth after-school program participants. Positive correlations were found between all of the individuals and institutions. This represents that as an at-risk youth receives information from an individual type, they also receive it from other individual types as well. The same was found for institutions correlated with institutions and individuals correlated with institutions. These relationships can help clarify where youth access information, how institutions and individuals can partner in communicating information to youth, and why it is imperative for institutions and individuals to share community knowledge with youth in engaging, accurate ways. Community issues are present in every at-risk youth's community, and need to be considered by individuals and institutions.

Acknowledgement:

This work was supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture - Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) funding program – Youth Involved in Community Issues #00071740; #2009-41520-05538.

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