



Research Article

“You Can’t Sit with Us:” Gender Bias in New Orleans Youth Programming

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 exasperated resources available for our global society, however, a group largely impacted by outcomes has been youth. Schools, extracurricular activities, recreational spaces, and youth spaces were shut down and left to recover with new challenges. In Orleans Parish, youth make up one third of the population and receive more than their fair share of blame for problems such as violence. **Purpose:** For Black youth in particular, they are often overlooked when it comes to their needs and stigmatized in their ability to live their everyday lives. This research focuses in on the perceptions of LGBTQ+ youths experiences with youth serving organizations by understanding how youth and community view their presence and contributions to solving youth issues. **Results:** Gender bias in program implementation and approach showcase the differences in outcomes and youth participation. It also presents a challenge for not only providers but local youth in their understanding of solving issues and interacting with youth spaces. Using Monique Morris’s Push Out theory, youth programs and other spaces continue the pattern of the criminalization of Black girls and LGBTQ+ youth. **Implications:** “Pushing Out” certain groups, especially based on gender, compounds the prejudicial layers of overlooking Black youths’ needs. Addressing gender bias and expanding the view of who and how to serve youth will provide greater benefits for youth and the global society.

Keywords: Black girls; Youth; Youth serving organizations; COVID-19

Introduction

“When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary” [1]. The Miseducation of the Negro, provides reflection and the inspiration to find the place many Black girls occupy in youth spaces. For so long, many of us have existed in the ‘proper place’ that society, the status quo, misogyny, and other people have “put” us in. That place often time does not reflect the “place” in which we ourselves

do not exist or see for ourselves, but many of us are here. Many of us do not have the resources or words to describe where we should be, but often we know how to express where we should not be. Monique Morris’s, “PushOut: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools” provides the theoretical framework [2], for examining the gender bias against Black youth girls outside of the educational sphere in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Mayor’s Office of Youth and Families reports one-third of Orleans Parish is made up of youth [3], a city with around 383,997 residents, of which 60% of residents identify as Black/African American [4]. The COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 exasperated resources available for the parish, particularly youth, so organizations such as those labeled “youth serving organizations” and local youth workers, worked to address community issues. Black youth, have often been overlooked in their needs. To address

the needs of Black adolescents, youth serving organizations are outlets that provide emotional and physical resources to support New Orleans youth where others lack. Previous literature has shown that effective youth programming can decrease violence and promote a more positive outlook [5-9]. A systemic gap built off racism and sexism pose a threat to the sanctity that is Black girlhood [10-14].

Results from this project works to narrow the gap and highlight the incomparable experience of Black girls and the environment surrounding them by answering the following questions:

1. Is there a gender preference in youth programming?
2. What limitations/barriers exist for non-male youth to receive resources?
3. How does gender bias show up in community’s understanding of what it means to be a youth in New Orleans?
4. Do youth programs provide an alternative route to schools?

“Pust Out” [2] highlights systemic barriers and biases that tarnish the Black girl experience in the education system. The predecessor of “Pushout” mentions Black boys when discussing the school to prison pipeline [15]. However, Morris exposes how policies, disciplinary practices, and social stereotypes also punishes Black girls in school. Her main argument is that mistreatment has long-term consequences as young girls are pushed out of the education system and into the juvenile justice system, either inside or outside the school building. As a resolution, Morris [2] calls for a reevaluation of school policies and practices to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for Black girls. This can only be done by acknowledging the intersectionality of race and gender in education theory. This paper furthers PushOut to consider youth programs as a similar entity such as primary and secondary school. When using qualitative methods, there was a presence of a heteronormative, patriarchal culture that places emphasis on the Black young male experience, while simultaneously excluding girls from the youth programming resources and mentorship [15].

This reported evidence of school not being a safe space is more complex when bringing gender into the conversation. On the national, state, and municipal level, there are statistics to support the claim that schools disproportionately discipline Black girls [16]. This discipline can be seen in both in-school punishments and suspension rates [16]. This treatment is consistent with PushOut theory. Therefore, the youth development alternative spaces where youth programming is offered in New Orleans and beyond must analyze whether there is a bias that prevents the objective being equitable for everyone.

Background

Theoretical Framework

Monique Morris’s, “Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools” provides a comprehensive examination of the complex intersectionality between race, gender, and education within the context of the United States [2]. Drawing upon critical race theory [17], feminist theory [18], and intersectionality [19-21], Morris constructs a theoretical framework that illuminates the structural inequalities and systemic injustices that contribute to the marginalization and criminalization of Black girls in the education system.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Central to Morris’s analysis is the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) [17], which interrogates how race intersects with systems of power and privilege [2]. CRT highlights the role of systemic racism in shaping societal structures and institutions, including education. Morris applies CRT to deconstruct the racial biases and discriminatory practices within schools that disproportionately target Black girls for punitive measures such as suspension, expulsion, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Feminist Theory

Morris also employs feminist theory to explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black girls within the education system [2]. Morris examines how gender norms, stereotypes, and expectations intersect with race to shape the educational trajectories of Black girls. She critiques traditional notions of femininity and respectability that are often used to discipline and control Black girls in school settings, highlighting the ways in which these constructs perpetuate systemic inequalities.

Intersectionality

At the heart of Morris’s analysis is the concept of intersectionality [18-21], which emphasizes the interconnected nature of social identities and systems of oppression. By centering the experiences of Black girls at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other axes of identity, Morris reveals the unique ways in which they are marginalized and criminalized within the education system. Intersectionality allows Morris to examine the complex interplay of factors that contribute to the “Pushout” phenomenon, shedding light on the multiple layers of discrimination and disadvantage faced by Black girls.

Structural Violence and Institutional Racism

Morris situates her analysis within the framework of structural violence [22] and institutional racism [23-24], which conceptualizes

systemic inequalities as forms of violence perpetuated by societal structures and institutions. She highlights how policies such as zero-tolerance discipline [2], school resource officer programs, and the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately harm Black girls, perpetuating cycles of poverty, incarceration, and disenfranchisement. Through this lens, Morris exposes the ways in which the education system serves as a site of structural violence against Black girls, reinforcing broader patterns of racial inequality and social injustice.

Black Girls in School

With new developments within Black girlhood studies, there has been an outpour of research of the experience of Black girls in K-12 school systems [25-28]. On a national, state, and municipal level there is evidence of Black girls being disproportionately discriminated against [16]. The Georgetown Law Center and National Women Law Center collaborated to find discipline patterns in K-12 public schools [29]. By using data collected from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights 2017-2018 academic year, the research team saw alarming rates of discipline disparities in suspension rates, expulsion, arrests, restraints, law enforcement referrals, and alternative school transfers [29]. To contextualize the Black girl experience with the white girl experience, Black girls were 4.19 times at risk of receiving out-of-school suspension, 3.99 times at risk of expulsion, 3.66 times at risk of being arrested at school, 2.17 times at risk of being physically restrained, and 5.34 times at risk if being transferred to an alternative school for disciplinary reasons [29-31]. In all instances, Black girls are more at risk than their white counterparts, and the disheartening aspect of this risk is that it is systemic and bleeds throughout the nation [7].

From the same academic year, the National Women Law Center used the same suspension rate data set from the U.S. Department of Education to examine the impact of discipline practices for Black girls by states [29-31]. When looking at the entire state of Louisiana, the results are consistent with the national analysis as Black girls are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than white girls [29-32]. Respectively, Black girls are reported to have an 8.7% suspension rate while white girls only have a 2.3% suspension rate [30]. The Times Picayune 32 reports expulsion rates in the city on a decline, yet suspension rates are on a rapid rise. These suspension rates include both in-school and out-of-school rates. In fact, New Orleans’s out-of-school suspension rate outpaces the state levels as the city’s 2017 average is 10.5% while the state’s is 8.3%. [32] The Council of State Governments Justice Center is aware of the disparaging statistics, so much so that they are utilizing a comprehensive discipline consensus report under their school policy [33]. The school discipline executive summary acknowledges that queer and students of color are disciplined

more; however, the report offers resolutions to the issue. There are key points of interventions to create a better school environment: a positive school workspace, tiered behavior interventions, and lastly education, police, and court partnership to prevent arrests and juvie referrals [34].

The positive school climate is remnant of the positive youth development theory [35]. There have been legitimate objections to this theory as it lacks the nuanced experiences of poor, queer, and racialized students [36]. This is the very same population that feels the brunt of disciplinary practices. Moreover, the tiers play a role in the climb of suspension rates from 2012 to 2017 [32]. The three-tier system penalizes actions based on their intensity. For example, tier one is the most serious offense like drug distributions, tier two is medium offenses like blank, and tier three is low level offenses like dress code violations [37]. The Times Picayune [32] states that students who are first time offenders do not suffer suspensions, but they will if behavior is repeated [32]. This tier system bottlenecks students as they are shoveled into in-school or out-of-school suspension instead of being expelled. The method of helping students has not changed but rather de-intensified.

Alternative Spaces

With the previous literature presented, there is a large scholarly and community gap on how to provide an accurate solution for displaced Black girls who are pushed out of the classroom. Since there is evidence of the educational system not being a safe space, an alternative that scholars suggest community strategizing to create youth programs [10]. We can use literature that focuses on similar at-risk populations, LGBTQ+, low-income, and/or other racialized minorities, and replicate them to address the development of Black girls [37-39]. In a 2016 study conducted by Wagaman [36], the findings of the study show relationship between empowerment and community engagement and critical consciousness among LGBTQ+ youth.

There was a social need for this assessment as LGBTQ+ youth present a distinctive set of service requirements. However, there was a gap on research on effective service strategies for LGBTQ+ youth as pre-existing literature is scarce. Youth empowerment emerges as a promising approach to positively impact the well-being of these youths who encounter discrimination. This study delves into the correlation between the social justice youth development framework [40] and youth empowerment within a sample of LGBTQ+ youth. The major findings within the study is that general population youth organizations can better serve LGBTQ+ by engaging in training and development to better understand systemic context of LGBTQ+ youth (critical consciousness), seek partnership with LGBTQ+ programs to identify and develop opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth to engage in the community

that validate their identity, and general populations workers can support by referring LGBTQ+ youth to LGBTQ+ youth orgs and communicate with guardians about the values of participating in identity-affirming activities and spaces [40].

Methodology

The findings of this study were a result from a pilot project titled, “New Orleans Youth Development Ecosystem Needs Assessment.” The pilot project’s purpose was to understand the resources and services available to local youth. A needs assessment helps to understand what gaps are present and how youth serving organizations can leverage their strengths to meet the needs of New Orleans youth. Utilizing qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, youth and youth workers were recruited to participate in focus groups, interviews, and/or surveys. Study recruitment was advertised during city-wide youth organization coalition meetings and relationships established with primary investigator. To increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the combined analysis from the in- depth qualitative interviews and survey, researchers will conduct a member checking focus group [41] for the final phase of the study.

Youth are often tokenized [42] for their experiences and input without fully being able to articulate the experiences they have on boards and with organizations that provide services and resources. The purpose of the focus groups was to qualitatively explore experiences and barriers to youth accessing resources/ services in New Orleans. They will also serve as a space for youth to collectively discuss how youth serving organizations can serve them better. Youth from local programming were recruited to participate along with youth who were visiting local barbershops for services. Participants received a \$50 gift card for their time. The project was situated in Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) frameworks, seeing youth as community assets who possess knowledge and stake in community activities [43]. PYD theoretical framework understands that youth have to be engaged in a multitude of different factors within their environment-communities, school, organization, peer groups, and families. The result of youth constantly being engaged is a positive outcome such as creating opportunities, developing healthy relationships, and curating leadership skills.

However, the PYD theory does not allocate for youth that have systemic odds against them, i.e., those who are a racial minority, have a lower economic status, are disabled, and/or are genderqueer. Without taking into account this marginalization the PYD theory fails to understand institutional barriers that prohibit youth from engaging in their environment and therefore having a positive outcome in life. While working to understand how New Orleans youth programs provide resources and opportunities for

Black youth that the city or educational system does not provide, participants revealed gaps in knowledge and service. Because youth programs are seen as a safe alternative to provide guidance and discipline, it must be analyzed on whether there is a bias that prevents the objective being equitable for everyone. A total mixture of 10 focus groups and informal interviews were conducted with almost 50 participants. Study researchers transcribed audio and used qualitative analysis techniques to identify themes and ideals that generate new knowledge answering the research questions. Researchers trained in qualitative data analysis will conduct the analysis using constructivist grounded theory techniques⁴⁴ using Dedoose software as an organizational tool for data analysis. Using peer debriefing and consensus building around themes [45], the researchers came together to build a codebook consisting of code families with definitions. This iterative process helps to identify segments in which codes did not agree, so that the coders can address and edit the code segments and move on with more accurately coded material [46].

Participant Makeup

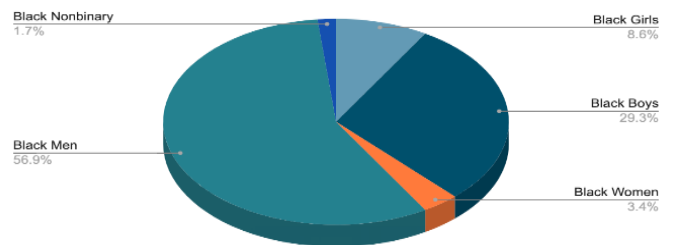


Figure 1: Participant Makeup for Youth and Youth Workers.

Results

The overall study concluded seven themes, and this article highlights three themes from the study that particular highlight the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth within the context of the forums in which the focus groups and interviews were conducted. While youth serving organizations were the primary focus, Barbershops emerged as a non-traditional space for youth to convene and receive development or a place to receive resources that shape their identity. It was also a means for understanding the pulse of the community.

Barbershop Culture

Barbershop Culture is described as the unspoken rules governing behavior in the barbershop. It encompasses a nuanced set of social norms and expectations that are applied intergenerationally. These guidelines dictate everything from how patrons interact with one another to the etiquette observed while waiting for a haircut,

respect for one another’s time, engaging in lively conversations on topics ranging from politics to sports, and adhering to an unwritten code of conduct that fosters camaraderie and unity are all integral components of this informal yet deeply ingrained framework. Moreover, the barbershop serves as more than just a place to get a haircut; it’s a communal space where the Black community can gather to connect, share stories, seek advice, and forge bonds that transcend mere hair grooming.

At its core, the barbershop functions as a microcosm of the broader community, often reflecting the personality, values, and cultural identity of its owner. The ambiance, décor, and even the music playing in the background all contribute to shaping the unique atmosphere of the establishment. Through these elements, the owner communicates a distinct vision and ethos, which in turn influences the interactions and experiences of patrons. “We give respect and we demand respect in here and so whenever you see a youngster come in.” Whether it’s a classic, no-frills barbershop exuding a sense of nostalgia or a modern, stylish space embracing contemporary trends, each shop reflects the individuality and character of its proprietor, further enhancing its role as a gathering place for Black men seeking both grooming services and meaningful connections.

Gender Bias

Gender bias refers to the phenomenon wherein individuals or groups are treated differently based on their gender or sexual orientation, often resulting in unequal opportunities, expectations, or treatment. This bias can manifest in various forms, ranging from subtle stereotypes and assumptions to overt discrimination and prejudice. Data that reflects gender bias may demonstrate disparities in access to resources, representation in leadership roles, or treatment within institutions such as education, healthcare, and the workplace [47]. Furthermore, gender bias is not limited to negative treatment but can also encompass positive biases, such as preferential treatment or stereotypical expectations that may still reinforce gender norms and inequalities.

Acknowledging and addressing gender bias is essential for promoting equality and fostering inclusivity. By critically examining data and identifying patterns of bias, individuals and organizations can work towards implementing policies and practices that mitigate discrimination and promote fairness. This may involve implementing gender-neutral policies, providing training on unconscious bias, and actively challenging stereotypes and assumptions. Additionally, promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives that prioritize the voices and experiences of marginalized genders and sexual orientations can help create environments that are more equitable and respectful for all individuals.

Identity

Identity encompasses the core aspects of an individual’s sense of self, encompassing their beliefs, values, experiences, and affiliations. It is the composite of various factors, including cultural background, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status, among others. Identity is not static but rather evolves over time through interactions with others, personal reflections, and life experiences. It serves as a lens through which individuals interpret the world around them and navigate their relationships, shaping their perceptions, behaviors, and sense of belonging. “They searching for identity. It’s an identity crisis with youngsters and just to the adopt an identity that that’s acceptable.”

Furthermore, identity is inherently multifaceted and intersectional, meaning that individuals possess multiple layers of identity that intersect and interact with one another. These intersections influence how individuals experience privilege, oppression, and belonging within society. Embracing and understanding one’s identity is essential for fostering self-awareness, resilience, and authenticity. It also provides a foundation for building meaningful connections with others, fostering empathy and understanding across diverse communities. Ultimately, identity is a complex and dynamic aspect of human existence that contributes to the richness and diversity of human experience.

Discussion

The results highlight the significance of Barbershop Culture as a vibrant and integral aspect of Black community life. This culture is not merely confined to grooming practices but encompasses a rich tapestry of social norms, expectations, and traditions that shape the interactions and experiences of patrons. The findings underscore the role of the barbershop as a communal space where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to connect, share stories, and forge bonds. The intergenerational transmission of barbershop etiquette highlights its enduring importance and relevance within the Black community, serving as a space for cultural continuity and identity expression.

Furthermore, the study elucidates how the ambiance and ethos of the barbershop are deeply intertwined with the personality and vision of its owner. Whether reflecting a sense of nostalgia or embracing contemporary trends, each barbershop cultivates a distinct atmosphere that resonates with its clientele. This underscores the role of the barbershop owner as a cultural steward, shaping the cultural identity and community dynamics within the establishment. Understanding these nuances is crucial for appreciating the multifaceted role of the barbershop in fostering social cohesion and collective identity among Black men.

The findings shed light on the pervasive nature of gender bias and its impact on individuals within society. Gender bias manifests in various forms, from subtle stereotypes to overt discrimination, and can have profound implications for access to resources, opportunities, and treatment. The data underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing gender bias to promote equality and inclusivity. Moreover, the study highlights the need for diversity and inclusion initiatives that prioritize the voices and experiences of marginalized genders and sexual orientations. By amplifying these voices and fostering dialogue around gender bias, organizations can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all individuals. Recognizing and addressing gender bias is not only a moral imperative but also essential for fostering diversity, innovation, and social progress within society.

The results illuminate the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity, encompassing a diverse array of factors that shape individuals’ sense of self and belonging. Identity is not static but evolves over time through interactions, experiences, and self-reflection. The findings underscore the importance of embracing and understanding one’s identity for fostering self-awareness, resilience, and authenticity. It also highlights the intersectional nature of identity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. These intersections influence individuals’ experiences of privilege, oppression, and belonging within society. Embracing intersectionality is essential for fostering empathy, understanding, and solidarity across diverse communities, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society. By acknowledging and embracing the complexities of these factors, we can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments that celebrate the diversity of human experiences and identities.

Implications and Next Steps

Understanding Barbershop Culture

The findings on Barbershop Culture provide valuable insights into the social dynamics and community-building aspects of barbershops within the Black community. Researchers can further explore the impact of Barbershop Culture on social cohesion, mental health, and well-being among patrons. Understanding the role of barbershops as informal community spaces can inform interventions aimed at promoting social support networks and addressing social isolation, particularly among Black men. Additionally, examining the intersectionality of Barbershop Culture with other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, can deepen our understanding of how these cultural spaces shape individual experiences and identities.

Addressing Gender Bias

The identification of Gender Bias highlights the pervasive nature of gender-based inequalities and discrimination within various sectors of society. Researchers can investigate the root causes and consequences of Gender Bias across different contexts, including education, healthcare, and the workplace. By examining patterns of bias in data and decision-making processes, researchers can develop evidence-based interventions to mitigate bias and promote gender equity. Moreover, exploring the intersectionality of Gender Bias with other forms of discrimination, such as race and sexual orientation, can inform more comprehensive approaches to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Exploring Identity

The exploration of Identity underscores the importance of understanding the multidimensional nature of individual identity and its influence on lived experiences. Researchers can delve deeper into the intersectionality of identity factors and their impact on mental health, social relationships, and access to resources. By examining how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within different social contexts, researchers can develop interventions that promote resilience, self-acceptance, and belonging across diverse communities. Additionally, exploring the role of identity affirmation and validation in fostering positive psychosocial outcomes can inform strategies for promoting mental health and well-being among marginalized population.

Next Steps

Adults who serve youth need to understand that social and cultural norms evolve and while we hold true to many values and traditions, the evolution of time contributes to how service works need to evolve in interactions and approaches to addressing problems youth currently face. It is important to be aware of the multilayered nature that each youth possess and brings into any space they show up in. Letting them live as their full selves with room and space to grow and be nurtured.

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