

CULTURALLY EFFECTIVE VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Clifford R. O'Donnell

University of Hawaii

Efforts at violence prevention in the United States confront a number of difficulties. These difficulties include the pervasiveness of violence in the media including films, television, video games, music and news. In addition, easy access to guns and drugs facilitates domestic, school, workplace, and community violence. In some of our urban neighborhoods, the majority of children have personally witnessed one or more shootings. Although pervasive, there is considerable variation in exposure to violence and experience of violence by age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, and geography (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Guerra & Smith, 2006; McCord, 1997). This variation leads many to think of violence in categories often defined by race, ethnicity, and gender.

Likewise, we often associate culture with race and ethnicity. However, the variations within racial and ethnic groups exceed the differences among them. More useful and accurate definitions of culture are based on shared meanings (see, e.g., www.changingminds.org/explanations/culture/what_is_culture.htm). Shared meanings are developed through shared history and activities. People with common experiences, who live, work, and communicate with each other develop a shared view of the world (culture), expressed through their language, speech patterns, music, values, and behavioral norms (Barker, 2000). Sometimes these shared meanings occur within a racial or ethnic group; often they cross racial and ethnic boundaries, e.g., in youth culture, where youth in much of the world share common meanings expressed in dress, music, videos, websites, etc. Today youth, as well as adults, can use social networking websites to develop their shared meanings without even having face-to-face contact.

Before undertaking any violence prevention efforts, it is necessary to understand the nature of the culture and develop a trusting shared relationship with the participants. Consideration of culture is essential for effective violence prevention programs because programs effective in one culture (often the culture in which they were developed) may be ineffective or even harmful in another. The concept of culture as shared meaning has important implications for programs, including violence prevention. The first implication is that it is essential to know the shared meanings of participants in the program. To know the shared meanings, it is necessary to spend the time with the participants to develop the trust and knowledge needed to form partnerships with them. True partnerships with the participants are much more likely to result in effective program development, implementation, and evaluation (e.g., Mohatt et al., 2004).

Knowledge of the history, values, communication patterns, age and gender roles, and behavioral norms allow us to understand the context of violence, i.e., to see the multiple influences that result in violence and the shared meaning of violence within the culture. These meanings are typically manifested in the everyday activities and social networks of the participants. This cultural knowledge can then be used, in partnership

with the participants, to operationalize the prevention program. Instead of just translating a program developed in another culture, a culturally effective program can be developed using the communication patterns, roles, and norms of the culture. With this knowledge the program can be based on the strengths of the culture. The activities influencing violence may offer multiple strength-based options to help prevent or reduce the violence that would not be apparent from a deficit violence reduction focus. Affecting the activities and social networks influencing violence is more likely to be effective and sustainable.

Some of these principles are advocated by the American Psychological Association in *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists* (www.apa.org/pi/multiculturalguidelines/homepage.html). In addition, guidelines for working with marginalized groups have been developed (Keys, McMahon, Sanchez, London, & Abdul-Adil, 2004).

An example of a violence prevention project that focuses on cultural awareness with a marginalized group is Flint Fathers and Sons. This program with non-resident fathers and their sons seeks to prevent violence, substance abuse, and early sexual relationships among 8-12 year-old African-American boys by improving communication, social skills, and cultural awareness. "Preliminary findings suggest improved communication between fathers and sons and increased healthy behaviors among the adolescents" (<http://www.cdc.gov/prc/selected-interventions/notable-work/boys-health-risks-reduced-father-son-bonds.htm>).

An excellent example of a culturally effective project that illustrates the process of developing intervention based on shared meanings, in partnership with participants, is one on sobriety with Alaska natives (Mohatt, et al., 2004; also available for download: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/ATPSMPA/Mohatt.doc>). Similar procedures could be used in violence prevention with any cultural group.

Originally published on Teachsafeschools.org.

References

- Barker, C. (2000). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brown, J., Cohen, P., Johnson, J. G., & Salzinger, S. (1998). A longitudinal analysis of risk factors for child maltreatment: Findings of a 17-year prospective study of officially recorded and self-reported child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 1065-1078.
- Guerra, N. G. & Smith, E. P. (Eds.) (2006). *Preventing youth violence in a multicultural society*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Keys, C. B., McMahon, S., Sanchez, B., London, L., & Abdul-Adil, J. (2004). Culturally anchored research: Quandaries, guidelines, and exemplars for community psychology. In L. A. Jason, C. B. Keys, Y. Suarez-Balcazar, R. R. Taylor, and M. I. Davis (Eds.) *Participatory community research: Theories and methods in action* (pp. 177-198). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- McCord, J. (1997). Placing American violence in context. In J. McCord (Ed.), *Violence and childhood in the inner city* (pp.78-115). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Mohatt, G. V., Hazel, K. L., Allen, J., Stachelrodt, M., Hensel, C., & Fath, R. (2004). Unheard Alaska: Culturally anchored participatory action research on sobriety with Alaska natives. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 263-273.