2020

Managing the disconnect: A critical case study of neoliberalism in youth development practice

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Abstract

Aims: This critical ethnography interrogates the influ-ence of neoliberalism on youth development practice as instituted by the evidence-based practice and positive youth development movements.

Methods: I employed participant observation and grounded theory analyses in my role as facilitator of a youth participatory action research program in the context of violence prevention work at a large urban youth develop-ment agency.

Results: The disconnect between professionalized youth development and the lived experience of youth mani-fested in organizational policies and practices and meant that the agency had to balance competing interests and worldviews, reconcile the need for funding with social justice aims, and cope with the consequences of such conflicts.

Conclusions: Neoliberalism exacerbates a disconnect between youth development practice and youth experi-ence, contributing to an epistemic form of violence. Results are discussed in relation to Martín-Baró libera-tion framework, which emphasizes the recovery of his-torical memory, deideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing the virtues of oppressed people.

KEYWORDS
evidence-based practice, liberation psychology, neoliberalism, positive youth development, youth development

1 | INTRODUCTION

Youth development practice is influenced by the evidence-based practice (EBP) and positive youth development (PYD) movements. For marginalized youth of color, these dual influences support the maintenance of and adjustment to an unjust status quo through the imposition of neoliberal ideology. This exacerbates a disconnect between professional youth development practice and the lived experience of marginalized youth of color, representing an epistemic form of violence that silences subaltern voices (Castro-Gómez & Martin, 2002; Dotson, 2011; Spivak, 1998). This case study investigates how that disconnect manifested in a particular setting. Attending to the relationship between ideology and practice in this way makes for comprehensive ecological analyses that can inform a liberation approach to community research (Martín-Baró, 1994; Maton, 2008; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Watts & Serrano-García, 2003).

1.1 | Critiquing EBP

Originating in medicine, EBP is based on the assertion that practice ought to be informed by scientific evidence of what works. Applying the logic of EBP to fields like education and youth development is fraught with moral and epistemological problems (Biesta, 2007; Denzin, 2009; Trickett, 2015). Grounded in positivist assumptions about the nature of evidence, EBP privileges quantitative data and relegates qualitative data to a supporting role when assessing programs. The demand for evidence that is countable is expressive of a "global audit culture," which "implements conservative, neoliberal conceptions of governmentality" (Denzin, 2009, p. 155). The power of that culture to influence program development and evaluation emanates from standards set by government and funding institutions that devalue ways of knowing grounded in experience. Federal legislation and government incentivizing tout EBP as the "gold standard" for funding social programs, and similar standards exist at the state level, and among funding foundations (Samimi, 2010; Trickett & Beehler, 2013).

Mainstream youth development practice with marginalized youth of color emphasizes "containment" of those aspects of youth culture that are critical of the status quo (Baldridge, 2014; Kelley, 2014; Kwon, 2013). EBP is implicated in that emphasis by promoting "good behavior over social consciousness and critical inquiry" and perpetuating "an ahistorical, acultural, asocial, victim-blaming view of individuals" (Trickett, 2015, p. 201). Grounded in the "rhetoric of rationalism" (Pilgrim, 2011), human suffering is seen as a personal matter resolvable through expert-driven technologies and not open to contestation by diverse publics. Biesta (2009; 2010) relates EBP to a "democratic deficit" in education, emphasizing emotional wellbeing over sociopolitical emancipation, resulting in "complexity reduction" in educational systems that limits the number of available options for action. The implicit assumption that emotional wellbeing and critical consciousness are separate domains leads to more resources going to the former than the latter. While emotional wellbeing is essential for development, its artificial separation from critical consciousness development results in educational practices that promote youths' conformity to, rather than liberation from, an unjust status quo. This raises questions about who has the power to reduce such options for whom, and the normative goals of those who hold such power (Biesta, 2009, 2010; Fine, 2012; Kelley, 2014; Yang, 2009).

The promotion of good behavior over critical consciousness is accomplished largely through funding mechanisms (Baldridge, 2014). Government and foundation grants can come with requirements unfavorable to the missions of many nonprofits, increasing the likelihood that they will alter their missions to secure funding (Dees & Anderson, 2003). Those requirements include reporting data on outcomes based on normative assumptions about what constitutes good youth development. Frameworks that inform such requirements tend to ignore critical consciousness and social analysis. Notably, the Social and Emotional Learning framework (SEL) outlined by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) has become the basis for public education and out-of-school time youth development standards in many states (Dusenbury, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2018; Gordon, Ji, Mulhall,

Shaw, & Weissberg, 2011). Durlak and Weissberg's (2011) policy brief reported that programs implementing SEL demonstrated significant gains of "selected outcomes" including positive social behaviors, reduced problem behaviors, attendance and grades. They conclude that SEL should be "a main focus in research … [on] the factors that distinguish effective from ineffective programs to guide future policy and practice" (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011, p. 1). Such policy statements carrying the imprimatur of experts, combined with requirements attached to funding, privilege dominant, normative forms of knowledge production in organizational contexts. In so doing, they contribute to an environment in which the subjects of said knowledge are rendered voiceless (Mananzala & Spade, 2008), and in which the application of said knowledge functions as a "political instrument whereby power interests can be obscured by seemingly neutral technical resolve" (Goldenberg, 2006, p. 2622).

1.2 | Positive versus social justice youth development practice

PYD gained prominence in the 1990s by shifting the emphasis from ameliorating risks and deficits to developing skills and assets and youths' agency (Lerner et al., 2005). Not only do marginalized youth of color lack equal access to such programs, PYD historically has overlooked oppression. Based on "universalistic, white middle-class conceptions of youth" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), PYD may have little to offer urban youth of color vis-à-vis their structural marginality (Benson & Saito, 2001; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). However, critical scholars have begun to articulate the ways in which PYD might incorporate a social justice-oriented approach to youth development that rejects positivist assumptions about "normal" development as based on whiteness and maleness (Fox, 2016; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Kirshner, 2007; Lesko, 1996; Su, 2009). For example, Fox (2016) has proposed a "braiding" of youth participatory action research (YPAR) with PYD. She argues that YPAR as epistemology can push PYD to "fulfill its commitments to youth and communities engaged in critical work toward social justice" (Fox, 2016, p. 48). A social justice approach to youth development shifts the focus of intervention to unjust social structures (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Rather than merely ameliorating risks and deficits, the social justice approach develops youth as agents of social change by facilitating critical consciousness development (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). The aim is to develop their capacity to understand the sources of environmental risks, and to facilitate their agency to contest institutionalized oppression. In that vein, Jagers et al. (2019) have proposed a transformative approach to SEL that elaborates on the five core SEL competencies first outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Their revised definitions of those competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) reimagine SEL through an equity lens and demonstrate their relationship to the development of "justice-oriented global citizens." In this study, I contribute to the development of this line of inquiry by interrogating the ideological context in which the linking of PYD and social justice youth development occurs. Assuming that critical consciousness is a desirable outcome of youth development practice, professionals must be free to engage in critical youth work that incorporates overtly political practices. Yet how such critical work can be practiced in contexts marked by the normative influence of PYD and EBP is under studied (Baldridge, 2014).

1.3 | Neoliberalism

Originally a theory of political economy favoring unfettered markets, neoliberalism has increasingly been used to frame critiques of mainstream education and social service (Baldridge, 2014; Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Clay, 2019; Grady, Marquez, & McLaren, 2012; Nelson, 2013; Stovall & Dixson, 2015). In the youth development context, neoliberalism means over relying on market-based solutions to complex community problems, emphasizing individual over collective responsibility, and devaluing community knowledge in favor of expert knowledge; and with respect to youth of color,

neoliberal educational practices have been implicated in the maintenance of racist systems and structures (Baldridge, 2014; Clay, 2019; Lipman, 2011). Its influence has become "hegemonic as a mode of discourse … [and] has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us … understand the world" (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). Neoliberalism's influence can be subtle, manifesting in language, policy, and practice in ways that may contradict individuals' conscious beliefs. As such, neoliberalism imposes "regulatory arrangements and sociocultural norms" (Brenner & Theodore, 2005) that may lead people to assume that marginalized youths' problems can best be solved if they acquire job skills, work hard and participate more in the economy. This overemphasis on market orientations devalues collective or "socialized" forms of addressing social problems and reinforces destructive, socially regressive policies associated with the unrestrained accumulation of capital (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, 2005). According to Martín-Baro (1994), "deideologizing" everyday experience is one of three "urgent tasks" for liberation-oriented psychologists. This case study takes on that task through a narrative-based analysis of the ways in which neoliberalism, instituted by EBP and PYD, exacerbates racialized and class-based tensions in the context of youth development practice. Although PYD represents a significant improvement over the historically deficit-oriented approach to youth development (Damon, 2004), it "conceals a core of deficit thinking about youth" through implicit assumptions that individuals are ultimately responsible for overcoming structural marginalization (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011; Wilson, Todd, Occhiuto, & Garrod, 2020). Similarly, EBP's grounding in rationalist ontological and epistemological standpoints tends to obscure power interests inherent to practices such as youth development, allowing the dominance of neoliberal ideology to go unchecked (Denzin, 2009; Goldenberg, 2006; Standring, 2017). As such, PYD and EBP can be said to be both outgrowths and sustainers of neoliberal ideology, which itself sustains a disconnect between youth-serving organizations, their funders, and their clientele that reflects disparities existing in the broader society.

1.4 | Present study

Ethnography is useful for narrative-based research on the intersections of individual experience, setting level processes, and the promotion of social justice (Case, Todd, & Kral, 2014). Critical ethnography "endeavors to explore and understand dominant discourses that are seen as being the 'right' way to think" (Ross, Rogers, & Duff, 2016, p. 4). I explore the role of neoliberal ideology in shaping the experience of youth development professionals in managing the disconnect. Particular attention is paid to the ways individuals and institutions talk about themselves, revealing the influence of dominant forces (Lichterman, 2002). Two overarching questions guided the study:(a) How do racialized and class-based power dynamics manifest in policy and practice? (b) How do agency personnel respond to those manifestations? Additional questions emerged through the process of engagement with the setting under study and post-engagement analyses regarding neoliberalism, funding policy, and individual and organizational narratives.

1.4.1 | The research setting

"The Agency" is a leader in youth programming for over 40 years in the large Midwestern city where it is located. It describes itself as "facilitating personal development, strengthening family relationships, and enhancing the community's wellbeing." Their Youth Development services include in-school and after school programs that straddle the line between the PYD and the social justice orientations, ranging from employment readiness and health promotion to critically examining social issues. Clinical services include counseling, substance abuse, and family intervention services. In the year before this study began, the Agency served approximately 3,000 youth. Most were adolescents, Black (48%) and Latinx (31%), more female (55%) than male (45%), and about 75% lived in poverty. There was significant staff turnover before this study related to organizational restructuring processes, diminishing funding opportunities, and demographic changes in and around the Agency's immediate neighborhood. That restructuring involved a shift to a more business-like model, including reducing the number of full time

employees in favor of independent contractor relationships. Their internal research showed that gentrification contributed to shifts in where services were most needed. As part of their strategic planning process, the Agency adopted a "violence and trauma focus" to frame their work and decided to expand services to the south side of the city where the need was greatest. This context of flux was associated with increased pressure from funders to demonstrate outcomes and increase recruitment and retention, as well as increased tensions among staff and disruption to programming.

My multiyear collaboration with the Agency included various forms of consultation. Several of the Agency's staff of color had been arguing for more explicit attention to racism in the work they do, but felt that their arguments were dismissed by the mostly white management and board of directors. As one of few men of color at the organization, with expertize in race and racism, my entrée at this time strengthened that argument. I agreed to help develop programming for young men of color on the condition that it be developed in collaboration with youth, based on a youth participatory action research (YPAR) model. The program we developed engaged young men in research and activism related to gang violence and police brutality. I facilitated the YPAR program during the first summer program cycle, and cofacilitated during the following year.

1.4.2 | Participants

YPAR participants were 16 young men, 15–20 years old. They identified as Black ($n = 9$), Latinx ($n = 6$), and Asian ($n = 1$). Three were gang-affiliated and had dropped out of school, three were college students, and 10 were high school students. Two identified as Queer. Agency personnel were directors ($n = 4$), managers ($n = 3$), staff ($n = 4$), and interns ($n = 3$), 18–63 years old. They were 10 women and four men, and identified as White ($n = 9$), Black ($n = 2$), and Latinx ($n = 3$). All names used below are pseudonyms.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Methodological and analytic framework

This study was based in a reflexive model of science in which intersubjectivity of researcher and participant is key to the validity of data (Burawoy, 1998; Kelly, 2006). Being an "observant participant" meant that observation was an "appendage" to my main activity of participation in the life of the organization (Vargas, 2008). As such, I was able to "see structure happen" (Lichterman, 2002) in the form of policies, practices, and processes. My task was to "locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context" (Burawoy, 1998), and to engage in dialog with both participants and relevant theory. This approach is useful for liberation-oriented community research that gives voice to disempowered voices and interrogates dominant ideologies.

2.1.1 | Procedures

The primary source of data was field notes. Additional data included audio recordings of YPAR sessions and interviews with youth participants and agency personnel, and documents produced by the Agency and two of its funders.

Participant observation
Observations occurred while performing my role as facilitator of the YPAR program 3 days a week, during staff meetings, and "down time" at the agency. During and immediately after time in the field, I kept detailed field notes

that included both objective observations of what occurred and reflective writing about my subjective experience as a member of the setting. I used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) to identify repeating concepts that helped explain what I observed, and that were used to code subsequent data. The goal was to identify concepts relevant to the research questions, which then served to generate additional questions for subsequent observations, to develop interview questions, and to inform theoretical sampling of interviewees and other data sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

Data analysis

Coding procedures were drawn from Strauss and Corbin's (1991) grounded theory (GT). *Open coding* involved "microanalysis" of field notes to identify specific words, phrases, or sentences that represented categories relevant to emergent research concerns. Repeating words or phrases were used to label recurring phenomena and code larger segments of text. *Axial coding* facilitated the specification of categories by relating them to their sub-categories and linking them according to their properties and dimensions. This process provided conceptual linkages between microlevel processes and macrolevel forces, allowing for a systematic explanation of why phenomena occur, their conditions, and consequences (Lichterman, 2002). Finally, *selective coding* facilitated relating observed phenomena to concepts in relevant literature. This involved linking contextual processes to broader social forces by developing relational statements in analytic memos. Developing those linkages resulted in a "thematic narrative" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) that tells an analytic story about managing the disconnect in youth development practice. Although GT as explicated by Strauss and Corbin has been associated with post-positivism, their writings on the subject "possess a discernable thread of constructivism in their approach to inquiry" (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006, p. 1; Strauss & Corbin, 1991, 1994); and these analytic strategies have been found useful for striking a balance between the objective and the subjective in critical analyses (Lichterman, 2002).

3 | FINDINGS

The disconnect between professionalized youth development practice and the lived experience of youth manifested in policies and practices, and the ways individuals thought and behaved. That disconnect meant that agency personnel had to balance competing interests and worldviews, reconcile the need for funding with social justice aims, and cope with the consequences of such conflicts. As a participant in the setting, I experienced first-hand the tensions associated with having to cope with such competing interests. This thematic narrative is organized around six themes that articulate how these processes operated in the setting.

3.1 | Being misunderstood

At the heart of the disconnect was a lack of understanding of the experiences of marginalized communities of color. People with privilege tend to view the oppressed through a normative lens that obscures the social and historical roots of their current conditions (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). This fundamental misunderstanding shaped the Agency's organizational culture. It was universally believed within the agency that the predominantly white, middle class personnel did not fully understand the lived experience of their clients. For Maria, who was Director of Youth Development and identified as Puerto Rican, this meant:

> There's a disconnect between the population we serve and the staff ... a white woman who lives in [the suburbs] isn't really gonna understand what a youth in [the city] is experiencing ... that isn't taught in anything you can read.

The lack of understanding of "at risk" youth of color is a reflection of the broader societal chasm between middle class whites and communities of color. It also reflects the neoliberal ideology underlying initiatives to help such communities, which tend to employ rhetoric with "a long history tied to policy interventions steeped in discourses of deficiency" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 445). One of the Agency's perennial funding sources was a summer jobs program, heavily touted by the mayor in his reelection campaign, as a successful public/private partnership to improve the lives of the city's poor youth. The mayor's campaign website referenced the program on the "Public Safety" page under the heading "Reducing Gang Violence," following a section describing aggressive policing practices such as a "gang audit" identifying known and suspected gang members. The jobs program description reinforced a deficit-based conception of youth as lacking and at risk, ignoring the skills and capacities one must develop to navigate impoverished urban spaces:

> *[The mayor] is also dedicated to preventing children from joining gangs in the first place by providing them with safe alternatives … Many young people turn to violence because they* lack *social supports and opportunities for safe recreation; because they* lack *the education and career skills they* need *for a successful future; or because their basic* needs, *such as physical and mental health, are not being met.*
>
> *[emphasis added]*

Because Black and Brown youth are presumed to lack support, education, and skills, the assumption is that they will turn to criminal violence by default, setting up a paternalistic relationship between them and funders, mediated by the Agency that is positioned to "save" presumably "broken" communities (Baldridge, 2014; Kivel, 2000).

The Agency itself was misunderstood because of their disparate programs across diverse communities, making it difficult to attract funding aimed at single issues like violence. As Anne, the Executive Director described it:

> *We have … been told that we're hard to understand because we do so much … and as the Department of Public Health is viewing violence as a public health concern … we're trying to figure out a way to more simply talk about ourselves so that people understand [what] we do.*

Relatedly, the meaning of the "violence and trauma focus" was unclear to many staff. I often asked Agency personnel for clarification but their disparate answers meant I remained confused. Maria claimed that it "helps [The Agency] understand, because it is an all-white staff, that our young people are dealing with a lot of issues and that may help put things into perspective." That, combined with Anne's assertion that violence was increasingly central to public health initiatives shows that the violence and trauma focus was one way for the Agency to manage the disconnect. While the problems their clientele faced emanated from historically rooted structural forms of oppression, the violence and trauma focus spoke to dominant, medicalized conceptions that framed those problems as individual troubles needing intervention. That conception was reinforced by underlying assumptions of the summer jobs program that such troubles are best addressed through market-based solutions such as job training. However, framing their work in such narrow terms complicated the Agency's relationships with communities it served, especially regarding their efforts to provide services on the city's south side.

3.2 | Undervaluing community relationships

I frequently observed in my field notes that personnel critical of the Agency's new direction felt that existing and potential relationships with communities were being neglected, and that other organizations put the Agency "to shame" in that regard. Such observations informed my interviews. Lawanda, a Black woman with years of experience working in the community, claimed:

> *Those grassroots organizations are the ones who are more successful because, guess what? They give a shit about the kids ... they actually form real relationships ... they know their mothers, they know their grandparents, they know their uncles.*

Others observed that colleagues who had more experience than formal education were not valued for their potential to facilitate the Agency's expansion goals. Miss Vee was a Black woman who had been with the Agency over 20 years. Some felt that she should have had a more prominent role in the strategic planning process:

> *She should be someone that's communicating in the community, she has a lot of experience in community relationships. She is someone who could do so much more if she was in a higher position in networking and building.*
>
> *[Andee, Youth Development Specialist]*

The lack of "grassroots" influence on the Agency's strategic plan meant that decisions about how and where to offer services were driven disproportionately by concerns about the availability of funding, relegating community knowledge and relationships to a subordinate role. Many Agency personnel referred to this phenomenon as "chasing the funding." The pursuit of funds could help manage the disconnect, but could also limit the liberatory potential of Agency programs.

3.3 | Chasing funding

Increasingly scarce funding sources meant that the Agency had to pursue a wide range of funding to manage the disconnect. Because funders tend to support single-issue programs, according to Anne:

> *[We] have to look at a young person, the range of issues they are faced with ... and get those pieces of funds to be able to work with them ... and then you get into well here's the money options and this is what you're doing, so is there a connect in that way?*

In many of my informal conversations with staff, the most widely discussed instance of chasing funding was the Agency's plan to expand to the south side. While the board of directors framed that move as meeting the needs of neglected communities, many personnel were suspicious of the move as "catering to what's popular" without developing partnerships with existing community structures, and an example of the "white savior complex." The expansion was also the most concrete manifestation of the violence and trauma focus, of which many Agency personnel were dismissive:

> *We're reacting to the shift in funding language ... the overarching decision for that is that's where funders are going. It's a new and sexy way to rehash the same ol' shit that happens in our community.*
>
> *[Maria]*

Limiting the availability of funds to single issues like violence prevention is one way that philanthropic institutions can undercut grassroots efforts to transform unjust systems (Anh, 2007). While pursuing multiple funding sources helped the Agency cope with such limitations, the need to adopt language commensurate with popular understandings of complex urban problems came with other limitations.

3.3.1 | Funding limits programming

The disconnect manifested in limitations on programming. Some programs ceased to exist because their funders "wanted something a little more exciting." Other programs had to incorporate foci that were not reflective of participants' interests, capacities and cultures. For example, a long-standing program for girls had to adopt a STEM focus to receive funding from a major technology company's foundation, which led to disruptions:

> *So, we have to change the model and that is not something the girls have really received too well ... It's way more structured ... they're kind of fighting against it especially since they sit in the classroom all day.*
>
> *[Andee]*

Funding requirements also increased the burden of assessing program impacts. Even as funding sources dwindled, remaining funders increasingly required evaluation data. The burden fell largely on frontline staff who had to take time away from their programs to administer surveys. They frequently complained that funder-required assessment tools were culturally inappropriate and were redundant in relation to the Agency's in-house evaluation survey. Maria's opinion was that "people are overwhelmed with the amount of work ... while we're here for youth, we're not *here* for youth." The heavy burden of reporting outcomes to funders contributed to staff burnout and was psychologically disruptive for youth and staff alike.

Proponents of EBP frame the demand for outcome data as a science-driven approach to accountability (Morino, 2011). From a critical perspective, requirements to measure outcomes institute capitalistic conceptions of philanthropic funding as an investment for which there is the expectation of returns in the form of measurable outcomes (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). These influences instituted dominant ideologies that led Agency personnel to behave in ways that contradicted their stated values.

3.4 | Putting parameters around youth voice

Related to limitations on programming imposed by funders was the limiting influence of neoliberal ideology as enacted by the logic of EBP. Many Agency personnel desired to incorporate explicitly political organizing activities into youth development programming; and part of the new strategic plan to address violence and trauma called for "partnering strategically and intentionally with allies working in community organizing and advocacy." According to Anne, the Agency stopped involving youth in political activity because of the "way we are funded." The shift in emphasis toward EBP in recent years meant that the Agency "gets paid for the direct service piece of things." Funding institutions fund the provision of services, not political action, the assumption being that these are mutually exclusive domains. If the Agency involved youth in too much direct political action, those youth "would not be in programming," and the Agency would "get hurt by the funding." The distinction between provision of services and political action shows the fine line the Agency had to walk to keep the doors open. That distinction was imposed by funding institutions and was not a natural consequence of youth development practice. If strategic partnerships with community organizers and policy advocates contributed to the mission to develop individuals and communities, the challenge was to secure resources from funders who understood such activities as distinct from direct service. This false distinction is reinforced by tax policy that limits the extent to which 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in political action.

The challenge of incorporating community organizing into programming was one example of a broader challenge to engage youth in the design and implementation of programs. More radical personnel often told me that they believed youth and other community members should be fully empowered to make decisions about the Agency's direction. There had been a community advisory board in the past. While some personnel advocated for its reinstitution, others dismissed it as not worth the effort. The role of youth perspective in the development of the Agency was a frequent topic of discussion in staff meetings, specifically in relation to maintaining funding. Anne described this challenge as

"wanting to keep youth voice, but putting it within some parameters so that we can have a unified way of talking." The term "parameters" is a euphemism for epistemically violent practices like devaluing and silencing. In strategic planning meetings the idea of incorporating narrative-based methodologies into program evaluations was frequently dismissed. In Anne's words, "the challenge is always, how do you gather the stories so those get incorporated? Nobody wants to pay for infrastructure." The scarcity of funding for overtly political activities reduced the capacity of the Agency to engage in such practices. Those organizational limitations were also related to the imposition of market-based rationales in the way people thought and spoke about their work such that the lack of funds for "infrastructure" was reason enough not to engage in grassroots work. Rather than take up the challenge of overcoming such limitations, the Agency's efforts to manage the disconnect manifested in the insertion of the logic of EBP into their wide range of services. The effect was not only limiting of programming, but also psychologically disruptive.

3.4.1 | Tracking and disruption

Part of the new strategic plan called for "intentional, ongoing exploration" to link clinical services and youth development programs. I observed that implementing this practice was controversial because it often meant interrupting program activities. An example was the intake survey new program participants completed that was meant to assess exposure to trauma. The "Experience Questionnaire" measured 12 dichotomous (Yes/No) variables, and included a field to "describe what happened." Items referenced potentially traumatizing events, such as being "seriously hurt or injured (beaten up, broken bones, hit by a car, shot, etc.)." If any items were marked "Yes," a staff member was to ask the youth if they wanted to talk about it with a clinical social worker. In my experience participants had no reason to trust strangers with such intimate experiences on their first day of programming. However, most youth freely talked about potentially traumatizing experiences in the context of the YPAR program when such discussions were framed as building on their experiential knowledge rather than framing them as victims.

The term "tracking" refers to the various ways youth clients were monitored. The purposes of said monitoring ranged from assessing needs and outcomes to tracking compliance with program regulations and behavioral norms. The ways that tracking was disruptive also varied. Sometimes it was merely inconvenient, taking time away from program activities. Other times it was demoralizing because the interruption was accompanied by marginalizing assumptions about youth participants. The following examples demonstrate this range and show how routine organizational practices can usher marginalizing discourses into a setting.

The summer jobs initiative required participants to complete a specific number of hours of recreation, and an online financial literacy training. All activities had to be recorded on time sheets, which would not be accepted if the hours did not add up to prespecified totals, nor if any of the fields had been scratched out or left blank. The task of managing the time sheets fell to Julia, a 22-year-old Latinx intern. Further complicating the matter was the fact that these requirements were not clearly communicated to the youth. This meant that Julia was tasked with informing the YPAR participants that fulfilling these requirements would involve additional time at the Agency. The following field note excerpt documented this moment:

> Julia knocked on the door ... These interruptions are becoming routine. She said, "Okay ... we're gonna be calling you in on Tuesdays and Fridays." Some of the guys groaned, and I asked, "What happens if they can't make it?" "We will hunt you down," she said, "Because it's part of the agreement. You signed a contract ... they can withhold your paycheck if you don't come in for these things."

This excerpt demonstrates how marginalizing conceptions of youth could pervade the setting through apolitical-sounding, contractual language, causing disruption. I frequently recorded my own frustrations with these interruptions in my field notes. In the course of fulfilling her duties, Julia regularly had to interrupt the program,

often for extended periods of time. A woman of color herself, only a few years older than the participants, Julia was placed in an adversarial relationship with virtual peers. Being told they had to comply with training and skills development was demoralizing because it directly contradicted the goals of the YPAR program. On the one hand, they were developing a research project grounded in their experience and knowledge. On the other, they were being told that they lacked certain skills and would be punished for not acquiring them. The vague "they" that would withhold their paychecks suggested a shadowy force beyond influence, reminiscent of the "veiled hand" that can influence the ways YPAR projects can be carried out, as discussed by Lac and Fine (2018). It undermined the youths' autonomy so that they would be more likely to comply; and the term "hunt," was likely less about the urgency of developing youth into citizens and more about the urgency of compliance with regulations for the sake of keeping the contract (Baldridge, 2014).

A less formal kind of tracking involved monitoring youth compliance with presumed norms. Occasionally this form overlapped with concerns about funding, as was the case when the mayor visited the Agency as part of his reelection campaign. The visit was meant to tout the summer jobs program. Anticipation for the visit included several communications to staff about its importance for the Agency including instructions to prepare youth for a roundtable discussion with the mayor. On the morning of the visit the YPAR youth and I was preparing for the meeting when Lawanda entered the room to issue a warning:

> *Today is a big day. I want everyone on their best behavior. I don't want to see any sagging pants. If you got 'em that way, pull 'em up. I don't want to hear any talk about smoking weed or any of that. Remember, I'm the one who writes your paychecks. And I will withhold them if you don't behave.*

This moment demonstrates how external pressures can manifest in "dynamics of dominance" (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). The threat evoked in the youth concerns about interacting with authority such that they didn't "want to meet" the mayor, or "tell him our names." Lawanda felt speaking this way was culturally appropriate, explaining, "you have to let them know what the expectancy is," and that white staff members tended to "coddle" the youth. However, her comments were not based on observed behavior. The YPAR youth behaved so respectfully that they were dubbed "The Gentlemen's Club" by some staff who were impressed that they had so few "behavior issues." More likely, the need to ensure that the Agency was presented well influenced her to resort to stereotyping and threat-making. Under such conditions, what would otherwise be a culturally appropriate way of speaking reinforced the youths' marginalization. The pressure on Lawanda to represent the Agency well to a top funder transformed her into a messenger of the deviance-oriented ideology that is the implicit foundation of violence prevention programs such as the mayor's (Baldridge, 2014). In the process of providing support for "at-risk" youth- their strengths, knowledge, and skills being ignored—social hierarchies and deviance narratives were reinforced (Gruenfeld & Tiedens, 2010; Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Having witnessed this moment myself, and subsequently discussing it with Lawanda, I experienced first-hand the frustrating contradictions inherent to critical youth work. Moments such as these demonstrate the challenges of implementing YPAR as a critical pedagogy and the likelihood of being confronted with "the banal hypocrisies of neoliberal public institutions" (Lac & Fine, 2018, p. 578).

3.5 | Balancing competing interests

The desire to empower youth versus the need to appease funders was just one set of competing interests to balance. Balancing those interests was complicated by changes at the Agency associated with the new strategic plan. The part of the plan that involved linking disparate services and greater collaboration between departments was complicated by funding shortfalls that led most programs to be understaffed. That challenge fell largely to program managers who had to do the extra work of trying to "tie programs ... more closely together, rather than functioning as independent units." According to Frank, a white program manager, the lack of funding and staff

added to the psychological burden because "it really requires kind of an extra level of macro agency-wide thinking." That psychological burden came with unintended consequences for relationships with youth clients:

> *This stuff that I'm constantly thinking about on top of day-to-day programming; or like the girls come to me talking about issues at school and I wish I could do more to help them … if I had another support staff person.*
>
> *[Andee]*

Creating more collaboration across programs and departments was further complicated by differences in worldviews among Agency staff, funders, and youth. Some personnel felt that the financial literacy requirement for the summer jobs program was inappropriate because it ultimately reinforced youth's marginalization:

> *Let's talk about financial literacy, yes. But don't make [them] do 4 hours of that crap. Because the problem is, you get a checking account, they don't got any money after 6 weeks, the fees start to add up, the account gets closed, knocks down their credit … and then at 25 … they can't open a bank account … this is how the power that be ensures you stay in the place that you are.*
>
> *[Maria]*

Many of the YPAR participants agreed with Maria's sentiments and offered their own critiques:

> *Johnathan: They think we don't know that shit.*
> *Cristobal: It's because they think we're idiots.*
> *Johnathan: You know what it is? That's for all the Rufus' out there.*
> *Cristobal: Rufus was the stupid person in the video.*
> *Laquan: He look retarded.*

It was not the training itself they objected to, but the message it sent. The "Rufus" character in the videos seemed to equate them with financial illiteracy, and financial illiteracy with stupidity and retardation. The requirement for the training ignored that marginalized youth may indeed have resources for acquiring financial acumen. Two of the participants were brothers whose father ran a financial literacy foundation for low-income families. Others had been gang members and had to manage drug sales well enough to avoid violent reprisals for failure to produce profits. These realities were not reflected by the requirement for financial literacy training, revealing the disconnect between program developers and marginalized youth. The gulf between these two worlds creates a power vacuum into which marginalizing discourses flow. Thus frontline staff were caught in a bind. On the one hand, they recognized youths' worldviews, knowledge and skills as foundations upon which to build critical youth development practice. On the other hand, their programs were at risk of losing funding if they didn't comply with funders' requirements that undermined youths' capacities.

White staff members were also aware of the racialized tensions inherent to decisions about programming. As is common for many White Americans, they struggled to understand the social and historical roots of such tensions, let alone how they should respond (Coleman, Bonam, & Yantis, 2019). The recognition that what programs required might not be in the best interests of clients created a psychological burden to be managed. Chris was a White therapist who worked mostly with Black youth in local schools. He struggled with the disconnect between his own colorblind ideology and the recognition of the reality of racial disparities:

> *It's like oh, you're only saying that 'cause you're white or Black or Hispanic or whatever … Like it's how people feel so you gotta acknowledge that, but then again you can't let that paralyze what you have to do and what's necessary for the agency to do … So you take emotion out of it … It's all about your mindset.*

Chris' desire to "take emotion out of it" reflects EBP's "rhetoric of rationalism" (Pilgrim, 2011), whereas his emphasis on "mindset" reflects neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism over collective responses to social problems (Nelson, 2013). These reflect the dominance of White American culture generally, and had the effect of undermining the potential of collective social change efforts like community organizing as a viable approach to youth development practice. Neoliberalism also emphasizes market-based solutions, which relates to the fact that Agency staff experienced their roles very much in terms of quantifiable value, which was further reinforced by the influence of EBP.

3.6 | Having to prove value

The increasingly business-like atmosphere at the Agency was felt most acutely as pressure to perform. This was true for the Agency as an organization vis-à-vis funding requirements as well as for individual personnel. Managers and frontline staff were cognizant of the tension between quantitative outcomes data and experiential evidence of program effectiveness. In my discussion with Anne about narrative-based evaluations, she acknowledged that "data by itself was not very meaningful without the narrative," but claimed "data is easier to gather." Her distinction between narrative and data reflects how ideological pressures can limit individuals' thinking. Because the knowledge communicated through narrative is harder to gather and not prioritized by funders, it is not considered data and relegated to a supporting role. Thus, a professionalized way of knowing about program effectiveness can be limited by funder influence via the prioritization of the quantifiable.

Prioritizing the quantifiable also figured into staff members' thinking about their place within the organization. The cost-saving shift in favor of hiring more staff as independent contractors gave the Agency more flexibility to match funds to programs. But it also resulted in fear of firing or demotion. In some cases, that fear was made more acute by explicit messages, which in turn affected relations with youth:

> I've been told I need to prove why my salary's being paid … it's stressful … I feel like that comes through in my lack of patience with the girls … And I have to tell them that it's really important that we do get things completed in this program … But, it's kind of shitty to tell a young person, like we need to prove that this is valuable.
>
> *[Andee]*

Because the existence of programs and staff members' jobs were at stake, there was significant pressure to conform to the neoliberalist approach to program assessment that framed social impact in terms of return on investment. Such a framing leaves little room for building relationships with marginalized communities or developing critical consciousness in youth (Baldridge, 2014; Rich, 1986). Instead, the emphasis was placed on the value of individual staff members for the Agency's expansion goals. As Frank described, having to prove one's value to the Agency could intersect with accountability to funders, and conflict with one's responsibility to youth clients. He claimed that "it's really hard to measure what we're trying to measure," compared to, for example, observing changes in the ways youth "held their bodies" throughout a program cycle. But the "autonomy" to base programs on such experiential knowledge could only be won after "we've earned trust … that we're gonna do work [because] there are greater directives and strategic plans, so it's not that we have complete freedom." Thus, in practice, experiential knowledge developed through ongoing relations with the youth was subordinate to that which could be given monetary value. For individual staff members, proving one's value was a way to manage the disconnect in that it bought them greater flexibility in the ways they ran their programs, even if it came with psychological costs.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study explored how neoliberalism operates through EBP and PYD, exacerbating a disconnect between professional youth development practice and marginalized youth. Managing that disconnect resulted in epistemically violent practices, such as devaluing and silencing youth and community voice. I discuss these findings through the lens of Martín-Baro's (1994) framework regarding three "urgent tasks" for liberation-oriented psychologists: recovery of historical memory, deideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing the virtues of oppressed people.

4.1 | Recovery of historical memory

The ahistorical influence of neoliberalism frames youth development in terms of a "permanent psychological present," making it "impossible to derive lessons from experience" (Martín-Baro, 1994, p. 30). Research on social privilege and dominance suggests an *epistemology of ignorance* that causes people to misperceive, ignore, or deny the existence of institutionalized oppression (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). With respect to racism and its intersections, White Americans are less likely than people of color to possess historical knowledge about their embeddedness in society. Combined with the psychological incentive to maintain a positive (i.e., not racist) group identification, that lack of knowledge contributes to a kind of blindness to present-day institutional racism (Coleman et al., 2019; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013). In the absence of such critical understanding, the dominance of ahistorical, individualistic thinking about marginalized communities of color remains. The disconnect at the heart of this study was largely supported by such processes. The lack of understanding among White Agency personnel was at odds with staff of color's advocacy for more community involvement in the strategic plan and the integration of grassroots community organizing into programs. Members of marginalized communities of color are more likely than their white counterparts to possess critical historical knowledge of oppression, and to have developed cultural practices aimed at coping with and resisting oppression (Case & Hunter, 2012; Coleman et al., 2019). Integrating direct community involvement and organizing into the work of organizations like the Agency could allow for tapping into such knowledge and practices for the purpose of promoting both psychosocial development and collective efforts for social justice (Fox, 2016; Jagers et al., 2019; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). Such an approach would fit within the PYD paradigm if critical historical knowledge and cultural resistance practices are framed as strengths and assets. Putting that perspective into practice at the Agency was made difficult by dominant normative and regulatory concerns (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007). The neoliberal orientation of funding requirements meant a dearth of resources for such a critical orientation to youth development work (Baldridge, 2014). Outcome measures required by funders reinforced apolitical assumptions that the problems of marginalized youth of color were personal matters to be addressed through the right technical approach to practice, diminishing the possibility of engaging youth in collective community development. The capacities of youth serving organizations to manage this aspect of the disconnect could be supported by research and advocacy aimed at the development of critical historical knowledge among people in positions of power. Engaging youth and community members in educating staff, managers, boards of directors and funding institutions could serve the dual purpose of individual psychosocial development for youth, and the development of critical social justice orientations to youth development practice. Such critical education would do well to emphasize the role of neoliberalism in society generally, and youth development practice specifically.

4.2 | Deideologizing everyday experience

Neoliberal discourse "denies, ignores, or disguises essential aspects of reality" (Martín-Baro, 1994). The task of revealing the operation of ideology in everyday life is made urgent by its subtle nature. As "sets of ideas that make

people see asymmetric power relationships as natural" (Montenegro, 2002, p. 512), dominant ideologies tend to go unnoticed, even leading to rationalizations for the maintenance of an unjust status quo (Clay, 2019; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Jost et al., 2012). Conversely, making explicit the role of ideology in mundane practices can help explain contradictory behavior among well-meaning people with social privilege. The Agency's violence-and-trauma-focused strategic plan reflected neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism and market-based solutions to community problems. That emphasis was reinforced by funding policy that required financial literacy training and the use of individual-level outcome measures to assess exposure to trauma. By framing youths' traumatic experiences as personal matters resolvable through treatment, there was little room for the Agency to develop an understanding of violence and trauma as the products of racial and economic marginality rooted in historical processes. Without that understanding, the potential for integrating grassroots organizing into programs was diminished, framing it as just another technique rather than an urgent need. The lack of funding for such grassroots work only reinforced individualist assumptions about what constituted effective youth development practice, even if Agency personnel had a nominal appreciation for such critical work. Similar to the first urgent task, researchers and practitioners would do well to help youth development professionals recognize the influence of neoliberalism by "retrieving the original experience of groups and persons and returning it to them as objective data" (Martín-Baro, 1994, p. 31). For youth development professionals, the opportunity to critique the assumptions underlying their work may be fruitful. If such professionals had more opportunities to evaluate the alignment between their values and actions, they may come to different conclusions about the appropriate targets for intervention. In conjunction with their development of critical historical knowledge as described above, professionals may become better equipped to develop programs within a critical youth development paradigm oriented towards social justice (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013).

4.3 | Utilizing the people's virtues

The idea that oppressed people are virtuous and possess critical knowledge and capacities is both central to liberation psychology and commensurate with the strengths and assets orientation of PYD (Fox, 2016; Jagers et al., 2019; Lerner et al., 2005; Martín-Baro, 1994). Indeed, the Agency's grounding in PYD made it possible to incorporate social justice work in limited ways. However, the apolitical, orientation of both PYD and EBP meant that practices aimed at collective development and structural change (e.g., YPAR) were subsumed under practice and funding models that prioritized individual-level outcomes. Managing that disconnect meant that the Agency and its personnel had to be creative with the application of funding and the development of programs. But that creativity could lead to burnout and exacerbation of tensions. The previous two sections of this discussion fore-shadowed this dimension of Martín-Baró's framework. Recovering historical memory and deideoligizing everyday experience in the context of professional youth development would depend on close collaboration with oppressed communities. The challenge is to meaningfully collaborate with oppressed populations without reifying their oppression through tokenism and exploitation.

One of the virtues possessed by historically oppressed people is the strength of kinship ties and extended familial relations as a mechanism for coping with their collective marginalization (Yosso, 2005). Lawanda's observation about the success of grassroots organizations relying on genuine care and communal ties is relevant here. Professional ethics may require a certain distance between professionals and their clients. But that distance may also reify the disconnect that exists in the broader society that can prevent relatively privileged White people from viewing marginalized youth of color as members of their own communities. This is especially so when there are high degrees of residential segregation that cause White people and people of color to live in virtually different worlds (Lac & Fine, 2018; Rothstein, 2017). Organizations like the Agency could address this problem by giving it explicit attention in their hiring and promotion practices. Familiarity with and embeddedness in a given community could be as important as training and certification, as Andee recognized in her admiration for Miss Vee's connection

to the community. In both research and practice, more attention should be given to alternative models of nonprofit management that eschew the increasingly popular business-like approach in favor of a grassroots orientation that blurs the lines between social service provision and community organizing (INCITE!, 2007; Mananzala & Spade, 2008). These models involve strategic alliances between nonprofits and social movements, a preference for grassroots funding over foundation and government funding, and are oriented more toward advancing movements than preserving organizations. Black Lives Matter is perhaps the most prominent example (Burrowes, Cousins, Rojas, & Ude, 2007; Fox & Turner, 2016). This idea may seem radical to those socialized into an apolitical professional model. But the Agency's own history of engaging youth in some limited organizing and its defunct community advisory board suggest otherwise. The Agency abandoned these practices not because they were radical but because the influence of neoliberalism on funding policy and false distinctions between youth activism and youth development practice made them hard to sustain. Recent scholarship on the benefits of youth activism for youth development highlights the falseness of distinguishing between the two and should be more widely known in the field (Albright, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017; Christens & Dolan, 2011). Raising consciousness about and contributing to that body of literature is a key role for engaged scholars working in collaboration with youth-serving organizations. That role should also include attention to the ways in which community knowledge can be meaningfully integrated into strategic plans and programs in ways that both attract funding and advance the aims of critical youth development work.

4.4 | Limitations

The findings of this study are useful as a lens that can sharpen the focus of research on the intersections of dominant ideologies and social service policy and practice. The processes identified in this study can transfer to other settings that are qualitatively similar (Fine, 2006). The disconnect that was the focus of this study was a manifestation of general disparities that exist in the broader society. In applying the insights from this study to other settings, researchers should attend to the locally specific processes that shape that manifestation. There does not appear to be consensus in the literature with respect to how widespread such processes are. Future work in this vein would do well to investigate how other organizations like the Agency manage the tensions and conflicts described here. Specifically, studies that investigate whether having social justice-oriented funders helps mitigate these tensions, or how organizations can frame social justice aims in terms of PYD would make a valuable contribution in that regard.

Researchers should also be sensitive to researcher bias. Rather than attempting to exclude subjectivity in the pursuit of purely objective analyses, my aim was to balance the subjective and the objective. I treated my subjective experience to the same systematic analyses as other sources of data. As such, what might be considered bias was analytically useful in that it prompted questions to ask and propositions to consider over successive rounds of data collection and analysis. Given my relationship to the setting, subjective interpretations could be evaluated by others, and accepted or rejected by them. This approach invited participants into the analytic process and facilitated a co-constructed analysis. However, my positionality as a Black, cisgender, male academic meant a sensitivity to certain phenomena that others may be less sensitive to. Other researchers should consider how their own positionality influences their own sensitivities, and how such sensitivities can inform multi-perspectival analyses (Tebes, 2005).

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