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Culture Clash: Confronting Cultural Ethics Challenges in Community-Based Youth Work

Patrice Forrester, PhD, LCSW-C
Independent Affiliate
School of Social Work
University of Maryland Baltimore

Mariel Pfister, LCSW-C
School of Social Work
University of Maryland Baltimore

Kathryn Garcia Benjamin, BA
El Poder de la Gracia Youth Group

Rachel Imboden, PhD, LSW
School of Social Work – Affiliate
University of Maryland, Baltimore

Abstract

Youth workers may face cultural ethics challenges as they interact with youth in programs. There is limited research on youth workers' perspectives of program impacts on their practice in the US. The following qualitative study examined US community-based youth worker experiences of ethical challenges related to culture as they seek to develop relationships with youth in programs. Youth workers identified external and internal sources of cultural ethics challenges in their programs, which made it difficult to engage in or promote culturally relevant practices with youth. In response to these challenges, youth workers mediated between and engaged cultural environments, received professional development on culture in youth work, and interacted with youth based on their own ethical values. Knowledge of youth worker perspectives on their negotiation of cultural ethics challenges can inform youth workers, program directors, and policy makers in the formation of culturally sensitive practices and policies that may support youth workers in ethical youth work practice.

Keywords: Youth work, Youth program, Youth work ethics, Cultural ethics

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Youth workers are adults employed in community-based programs that promote healthy youth development (e.g., confidence, positive relations; Hadley et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2013; Vasudevan, 2017). They play an integral role in supporting healthy development through the relationships they form with adolescents and young adults (Vasudevan, 2017; Yu et al., 2021). Culture - the values, customs, and beliefs of a group or society that develop over time - can have an influence in youth workers' process of developing relationships with youth (Dolamore & Naylor, 2018; Forrester, 2021b; Galipeau & Giles, 2014; Hall, 1989). Codes of ethics encourage youth workers to appropriately engage culture by gaining skills and knowledge in culturally responsive and relevant care, cultural diversity, anti-oppressive practice, self-interrogation of biases, and addressing of inequities related to social statuses such as race, nationality, age (Association for Child and Youth Care; ACYP, 2022; Banks, 1999; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2008). Though there are ethics codes addressing culture in youth work in the US (e.g., ACYP, 2022; National Association of Afterschool Workers, 2022), not all youth workers may have knowledge of these ethics codes, particularly those who may not be connected with professional associations developing these codes (G. Cavaliere, personal communication, December 5, 2024). In addition, the ACYP ethics code has only recently been included in the US Department of Labor's definition of youth worker and has not been widely communicated to all youth workers in the US (C. Scanlon, personal communication, November 25, 2024). Despite youth workers' and youth programs' importance to the promotion of youth development, there is limited research on employed youth workers' perspectives of program impacts on their practice with youth in the US as more research focuses on the immediate relationship between youth and youth worker (Forrester, 2021b; Larson et al., 2011). Youth workers may face ethical challenges related to culture that are impacted by program structures and policies as they develop relationships with marginalized youth (Banks, 2010; Forrester, 2021b; Pope, 2016; Zubulake, 2017). Understanding how US based youth workers negotiate ethics challenges stemming from youth program structures or policies can better inform youth workers, program directors, and policy makers in the formation of culturally sensitive program practices and policies that better facilitate ethical relations with youth in programs.

Youth Workers, Culture, and Programs Targeting Adolescents and Young Adults

Youth workers' perspectives on culture and its influence on their work in programs targeting adolescents and young adults is limited, particularly in the US. The research available on this topic has mixed findings, suggesting that culture has positive, negative, or no influence on youth worker development of relationships with adolescents and young adults. Youth workers with a similar culture to youth (e.g., race, immigration or disability status) or who affirm youth cultures can support safe and connective relationships (Dolamore & Naylor, 2018; Forrester, 2021b; O'Heaney, 2018; Rubin et al., 2021). Culturally relevant programming can also produce positive developmental outcomes in youth such as positive wellbeing, healthy relational skills, and greater future self-orientation (Grills et al., 2016; Loyd & Williams, 2017; McMahon et al., 2023; Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022). The racial identity of the youth worker, however, has been found to not impact some youth mentors' ability to maintain relationships when their pairing with a youth was due to having similar interests to youth, living near youth, or youth and parent preferences to be matched with a mentor of the same race (Smith & Soule, 2016).

More studies have focused on how culture can negatively impact youth workers and programs in their work of promoting youth development. Cultural norms in programs (e.g., Korean, European American) that have conflicted with youth worker or youth cultures have sometimes been associated with youth worker challenges in engaging or maintaining relationships with youth (Kim, 2018; Smith & Soule, 2016). Often, minoritized youth (e.g., Black youth) experience racism in programs guided by European American cultural norms which can be harmful (e.g., deficit-focus; negative youth self-esteem; lack of attention to addressing systemic inequities faced by youth; Debrosse et al., 2023; Smith & Soule, 2016). Unequal power dynamics in relationships between adults with privileged social identities (e.g., class, education, race) and adolescents with marginalized social identities can also limit promotion of healthy youth development (Kennedy, 2018; McKamey, 2017; Ralph, 2014).

Some research has also identified simultaneous positive and negative effects of culture on youth workers and youth programs. In Canada, cross cultural mentoring relationships between youth workers and program participants could promote healthy development; however, tensions tended to occur because of the programs' irrelevance to the youths' Aboriginal culture (Galipeau & Giles, 2014). Youth workers have equalized power dynamics that occur in relationships between youth workers with more privileged identities and youth participants with more marginalized identities. They have done this by becoming more intentionally aware of systemic inequalities, leading them to critique their ideas for interventions needed to respond to program participants (e.g.,

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juvenile justice involved youth; Duron et al., 2020). Greater self-awareness and self-interrogation of their biases influenced them to build authentic, affirming, and equitable relationships with program participants with marginalized social identities (Duron et al., 2020). Privileged program and youth worker cultures can influence youth workers within the context of their program to stigmatize or not relate well with youth from marginalized backgrounds as noted above. However, youth workers can intentionally push back against this through engaging in ethical practices that are sensitive to the youths' culture and promote healthy development.

Cultural Ethics Issues in Youth Work Programs

Cultural ethics pertain to the values each culture has that may not align with the values of another culture, sometimes leading to ethical dilemmas when cultures clash in confronting the same issue (Erlen, 1998). Much of the literature that discusses cultural ethical issues in youth work is based in countries outside the US (Banks, 1999; Banks, 2010; Fox, 2019; Pope, 2016). Previous research has shown that youth workers have been impacted negatively in their interactions with youth due to the wider cultural environment (e.g., reduced government funding for youth services; program structures stigmatizing minoritized youth and families) that limit relevant interventions and curtail sustained engagement with youth (Pope, 2016; Zaal, 2014). Youth workers in these environments can experience cultural ethics dilemmas arising from conflicts between their core youth worker values of serving adolescents based on their unique needs versus the need to follow proscribed programs that lack such values (Pope, 2016). Youth workers may also be influenced by programs to focus on the deficits of youth served rather than also examining social inequities that perpetuate inequalities faced by youth (e.g., academic achievement gap; Carpenter, 2017).

Cultural Ethics and Youth Work in the Bio-Ecological Environment

To best understand how youth workers may view cultural ethics issues in their development of relationships with adolescents and young adults in programs, Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) bio-ecological framework is described. In Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) bio-ecological framework, individuals (e.g., youth workers) reside within various environmental systems (Forrester, 2021b; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The microsystem involves youth workers' immediate environment where they build direct relationships with youth (Forrester, 2021a; Hamilton et al., 2006; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). An example of the microsystem is Black and White youth workers with differing values, seeking to build connections with Black youth to support and guide them for a positive future (Froyum, 2013). The mesosystem constitutes youth worker interactions with entities or people beyond their immediate work environment as part of their job. For example, youth workers reach out to school teachers who work in a school with differing values to youth work.

The exosystem refers to the connections between the immediate work environment and another social setting with which the youth worker is not actively involved (Forrester, 2021a; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). For instance, Black youth workers, despite their resentment, feel compelled by largely White middle to upper class program administrators to develop materials that emphasize the "problems" and negative stereotypes of program participants. This is done to encourage donors in the exoystem, who have no direct interactions with youth workers or the youth, to fund the program (Froyum, 2013). The macrosystem is the cultural context that indirectly affects youth workers (e.g., cultural context of White racial privilege contributes to conflict between a Black youth worker and White volunteer youth worker regarding differing expectations around relations with youth and other youth workers; Froyum, 2013). Lastly, the chronosystem concerns the effect of historical and societal events on youth workers over time (e.g., racial othering of minoritized communities leads to racial and class stratification of staff in youth programs, contributing to subordination of youth worker cultures lower on the hierarchical scale; Forrester, 2021b; Froyum, 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Youth workers' perceptions of environmental (e.g., program) impacts on their practice with youth are influenced by their unique selves (e.g., cultural values) and surrounding environment (Forrester, 2021a; Forrester, 2021b; Burns et al., 2015). Youth workers may also impact their environment through their actions (Forrester, 2021a, Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

A complementary framework, critical positive youth development (CPYD) is a useful way to view the bio-ecological framework as it relates to youth worker interactions with youth. It provides a critique of larger societal injustices in the macrosystem (e.g., racism) that can produce cultural ethics issues in youth work practice. CPYD accounts for circumstances faced by marginalized youth such as discrimination, prejudice, or stigmatizing beliefs from the overarching US culture; this systemic oppression can influence youth work practice (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

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As it relates to youth workers, this framework suggests that youth workers and youth programs should not only promote healthy individual youth development in the microsystem (e.g., self-efficacy; positive relations with others), but also partner with youth in challenging systemic and societal oppression on the macrosystem (e.g., social activism, political advocacy; Gonzalez et al., 2020). There has been emerging evidence that critical actions for social change engaged in by youth can also lead to healthy developmental outcomes (Gonzalez et al., 2020). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the study's theoretical framework. Please note that youth worker interactions with each system of the bio-ecological environment are for illustration and are not exhaustive.

Youth workers face cultural ethics issues due to forces in their environment, inclusive of youth program policies and structures, that conflict with personal or professional values. Youth workers also have the ability to surmount challenges such as cultural ethics issues to ethically engage with youth. The following study seeks to build on the limited literature regarding cultural ethics issues in US based youth work, especially as it pertains to youth program impacts on youth work practice. We do this by exploring cultural ethics challenges perceived by youth workers in their interactions with youth in their programs. We also detail the ways youth workers respond to these cultural ethical issues.

Methods

Study data comes from a multi-method qualitative study conducted from August 2020-May 2021 exploring youth worker perspectives on building and maintaining relationships with older adolescents (14-17 years) and young adults (18-29 years). The study also explored challenging elements of relationship development (Forrester, 2021b). This article focuses specifically on ethical issues relevant to culture that were challenges to youth workers in relationship development with youth. Though youth programs can be supportive in engaging culture ethically in youth work and is alluded to in a few of our findings, we focus on the cultural ethics challenges youth workers face in their interactions with youth in their programs. Challenges expressed by youth workers relating to culture in their programs is important to understand as youth workers may not always honestly express these issues to those who pay, manage, and evaluate their work (e.g., programs, funders, administrators, supervisors) for fear of negative consequences to their program or themselves (e.g., Froyum, 2013). It also helps to understand how youth workers respond to cultural ethics challenges that arise in their programs. This information is necessary to inform improvements to program structures or policies that can better support youth workers in ethically engaging with the youth they serve. Supportive elements of programs that may facilitate youth workers' development of ethical relationships with youth will be shared in future articles. Our research questions for the current study consist of the following:

1. What are program structures and policies relevant to culture that US community-based workers perceive as challenges to developing relationships with adolescents and young adults?

2. How do US community-based youth workers negotiate cultural ethics challenges in their practice that they perceive as arising from youth program structures or policies?

Data Collection

This study was approved by the University of Maryland Baltimore Institutional Review Board. All youth workers in the study used pseudonyms and a pseudonym was given to the city (i.e., Strongport) where they worked to protect privacy and confidentiality. The community-based programs where youth worker participants are employed remain anonymous to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

Data was collected from youth workers representing community-based programs located in Strongport, a large US city with both strengths (e.g., local government initiatives to promote health) and challenges (e.g., community violence). Data collection was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest in the US related to high profile cases of police or private citizens' brutality towards Black individuals (Brown, 2020; Nickeas, 2021), and a violent attempt to take over the US capitol by some supporters of former President Trump (Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs & Committee on 76 Rules and Administration, 2021). For this article, we used interview data to answer research questions.

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing or telephone, due to mandated COVID-19 research restriction orders at the time of the study. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Youth workers received a

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$25 e-gift card for completion of the interview. Survey questions were asked at the start of the interview to collect demographics such as age and program role (See Table 1 for additional demographics). Sample interview questions included the following:

- *How did you come to work with this program?*
- *Tell me what a typical workday is like for you.*
- *Reflect on a particularly memorable experience in which social identity (culture, race, gender, age, education, etc.) had an impact on your work.*
- *Reflect on a particularly stressful work experience*

Each author has personal or professional experiences relevant to the study topic, specifically social work or youth work experience with adolescents or young adults. These experiences were reflected upon during the research and manuscript writing process. Our social identities and experiences influenced our analysis and interpretation of study data. The first author is a Black female social worker who has research interests related to youth workers, youth wellbeing, and health equity. She formerly worked with ethnically and economically diverse adolescents and young adults as a youth worker at a Christian church and as a mental health therapist in community-based programs. The second author is a white female queer social worker, doctoral student, and community program director for the University. She previously worked in both direct service and management of youth programming in Baltimore city. The third author identifies as a Christian Hispanic female. She works with Latin American (Central & South America) adolescents and young adults in a church youth group. The last author is a White female lesbian social worker and academic who previously worked with adolescents and young adults in various workforce development roles and currently conducts research related to workforce development and ethics in social work practice.

Sample

Youth workers were recruited through youth worker networks. Study flyers were emailed to youth programs or to individuals connected to the youth work field, who further distributed flyers to other youth workers or youth organizations in Strongport via email, social media, electronic newsletters; word of mouth or print newsletters. Youth workers were asked on flyers to contact study personnel directly if they were interested in participating in the study. More details on recruitment information may be found in Forrester (2021b). To participate in the study, one had to be 18 years of age or older and be presently employed as a youth worker in a community-based program in Strongport working with older adolescents or young adults. Thirteen youth workers consented to participate in the study, one of whom later declined to participate. A key stakeholder in the youth work field in Strongport (former executive director of a community-based program in Strongport serving older adolescents and young adults) was also recruited into the study. The key stakeholder shared characteristics with youth workers in the study and provided key contacts in the youth worker field during the recruitment process. Twelve youth workers and one key stakeholder participated in the study.

Youth worker participants were representatives of 10 community-based programs in Strongport that provided various services: workforce development (10 programs), educational enrichment (5 programs), creative arts (6 programs), community organizing (5 programs), leadership development (1 program), mentoring (4 programs), mental health (4 programs), family assistance (2 programs), sports/recreation (2 programs), nutrition and wellness (1 program). Programs served adolescents and young adults in Strongport, including youth of color, young males, high school students, and youth in underserved communities. A majority of participants worked full-time (9 youth workers). Youth workers' years of work experience with adolescents ranged from 2 to 24 years with an average of 11.54 years, and their years of work experience with young adults ranged from 3 to 22 years with an average of 8.23 years. Youth workers identified with either the female or male gender, with a slight majority identifying as female (8 youth workers). Most youth workers had a Bachelor's (5 youth workers) or Master's (7 youth workers) degree, except for one who had an Associate's degree. See Table 1 for a list of additional participant demographics. Information used in Table 1 was reported in Forrester (2021b) and has been paraphrased unless otherwise noted.

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Data Analysis

WebEx © from Cisco, a video conferencing platform, was used to record and transcribe interviews verbatim. In the current study, elements of theoretical thematic analysis were used (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) to analyze youth workers' interviews that had previously been coded using multiple methods (e.g., descriptive, subcode) in the larger multi-method study (Forrester, 2021b; Saldaña, 2013). The interviews were distributed amongst the first three authors. They used coding (summary word or phrase associated with an interview excerpt) to analyze interviews independently to answer research questions. Throughout the coding process, the first three authors utilized previously developed codes or added new codes that related to the study's research questions. After coding all interviews, the first three authors engaged in an iterative process of discussion and synthesis of codes. The first author compiled interview codes from the first three authors' coded interviews and drafted themes based on code discussions that helped to answer research questions. The second and third author reviewed and provided feedback on draft themes. Themes continued to be discussed amongst the first three authors until broad consensus was met. The second author developed narrative text for the themes which included example quotes with interpretation based on the first three authors' analysis and discussions. The last author was not involved in data collection or analysis, so provided another alternate source of knowledge that could be utilized to improve validity (Noble & Heale, 2019). This author reviewed the written themes and provided substantive feedback or editing to ensure themes were understandable and credible.

Findings

Our thematic analysis produced five major themes comprised of two parts. The first two themes relate to the sources of culturally insensitive programming that constrain youth worker relationship building efforts and the final themes relate to youth worker responses to these cultural ethics issues. The first theme is that there are sources of culturally insensitive programs outside of youth workers' immediate program environment that are perceived as constraints to building relationships with youth. This theme has two sub-themes, (1) Institutional cultures with conflicting values to youth work are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth; (2) Social or funding policies irrelevant to youth experiences or needs are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth.

The second theme is that there are sources of culturally insensitive programs within youth workers' immediate program environment that are perceived as constraints to building relationships with youth. This theme was also found to hold two sub themes, (1) Youth program cultures that devalue the cultures of youth or do not validate relevant interactions with youth are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth; (2) The cultural values of youth and their families that conflict with the youth work program is perceived by youth workers to constrain relationship development with youth.

The third theme was that youth workers negotiate cultural ethics issues by engaging and mediating between the cultural environment impacting youth programs and youth. The fourth theme that surfaced from the interviews was that the youth workers negotiate cultural ethics issues through participation in training relevant to youth work and by receiving professional development support from supervisors and other youth workers. The final significant thematic finding was that youth workers negotiate cultural ethics issues by using ethical values as a guide for authentic and supportive relationships with youth in youth programs. These themes provide relevant insights into program structures and policies relevant to culture that US community-based youth workers perceive as constraints in developing relationships with adolescents and young adults. These themes also illustrate how youth workers negotiate cultural ethics challenges in their practice that stem from youth program structures or policies.

Culturally Insensitive Program Structures and Policies

Youth workers identified various sources of culturally insensitive programs outside their immediate program environment, which they perceived as constraints to building effective relationships with youth. Those interviewed frequently reported the strain of the external environment on their ability to provide the best possible care for the youth they worked with. While the specific elements of the external environment varied, those frequently mentioned included funding requirements, national and organizational policy, institutions that interface

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with youth that lack youth work values, and systems of oppression within society. These findings illustrate the importance of Principle II.d of the Code of Ethics (ACYCP, 2022), which emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive, decolonizing, and non-discriminatory services.

Analysis of the interviews that spoke to this phenomenon identified *that, institutional cultures with conflicting values to youth work are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth.* Institutions where youth workers may engage youth such as schools can favor programming choices that center the needs of the system over the needs of the individuals within it, resulting in structures that fail to address the diverse needs of youth. Previous research connects pedagogical cultural relevancy to level of engagement for diverse student populations (Gay, 2010). Therefore, it is likely that a lack of cultural relevance hinders engagement in youth programming, as programs that do not resonate with the cultural backgrounds of the youth they serve may be less effective. One youth worker, in discussing these cultural differences shares, "The culture of their [student's] home and their community… has nothing to do with this classroom ...it's like a culture shock every time they come in." These findings highlight the ethical imperative to ensure that programs are culturally responsive (Principle II.i; ACYCP, 2022) and affirm diversity in life patterns and expectations.

Broader than institutions with conflicting values, some youth workers mentioned how the larger cultural environment dominated by white supremacy affects their programming, limiting their ability to engage with youth in culturally relevant ways. Youth workers discussed how some of the ideals held by white supremacy, like paternalism, perfectionism, and quantity over quality (Okun, 2001) impacted their ability to provide culturally relevant support to the youth within their program. One youth worker shared,

There is often an element of kind of paternalism that comes with white-run nonprofits or white-managed. They assist youth and their families from a Eurocentric view... best case scenario, it's [youths' ethnic culture] not legit… worst case scenario, we will say that it's inappropriate, it's wrong.

Other youth workers discussed the difficulty in providing for the individualized needs of the youth because of the pressure to fulfill institutional demands for quantity or "efficiency," as one youth worker described the conflict. Such practices contradict Principle I.d (ACYCP, 2022), which calls for recognizing sources of power and privilege and engaging in anti-oppressive practice.

In addition to the lack of cultural relevance, another sub-theme was identified that s*ocial or funding policies irrelevant to youth experiences or needs are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth*. Multiple youth workers spoke to rigid policies that enforce institutionally derived outcomes which often limit the flexibility necessary for effective youth work. One youth worker described how in her education to prepare her for this work, she was taught to prioritize efficiency even if that means "sacrificing" other elements of programming that support the needs of individuals or the community.

The youth workers discussed the influence of institutional culture outside the immediate program, such as schools. Some of these youth programs rely on schools as a crucial partner in the youth's care. "Working with schools... it's a building full of people that care about young people and in that way, we have the same mission. So… we partner with them." Some of the youth workers discussed working from school buildings to provide their programming. While these strategic partnerships have considerable benefits for both the schools and programs, they introduce another institutional culture with social or funding policies that may be irrelevant to youth experiences and be a source of culturally insensitive programming. One youth worker described his program as a kind of safe space within the building that did not hold the school's punitive culture.

Students they knew this is a space [the youth worker's office] they could go to…. This is a person who isn't necessarily working for the school but he's here… That also helped build some trust too… Other staff directly connected to administration and their punitive system… I'm actively trying not to route students down that track… There's a whole school to prison pipeline.

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Another youth worker shared an ethical dilemma involving a decision by the school to immediately contact police which resulted in a young girl being put in handcuffs for stealing from the program's cabinet. The worker described feeling it was an excessive response that did not align with her program's less punitive culture.

Sometimes these sources of cultural conflict originate directly from the policies set by institutions outside of the immediate program environment, like funding organizations or federal policies. Youth workers reported struggling to meet policy requirements while serving their youth effectively. One worker explained, "It's written by people who don't do the work we do." This disconnect underlines the need for systemic advocacy, as outlined in Principle V.e (ACYCP, 2022), to ensure that policies affecting children, youth, and families are informed by those directly engaged in youth work. Paternalistic attitudes in policy and programming, often driven by predominantly white leadership, were also identified as significant issues. These norms negatively impacted program relevance and youth engagement. Furthermore, policies that indirectly discriminate against certain groups were highlighted, with barriers including complex application processes, lack of language support, and cultural insensitivity. One youth worker, Jenee, recalled challenges when her agency began working more with the Hispanic population, noting, "Providing services became a little challenging during Trump coming into office, and it being changes to immigration… resources kind of started to trickle… dry up a bit. People became a little bit more leery of community-based services." While not within the immediate environment of the youth worker, these social and funding policies can have a prolific impact on the youth worker's relationship with the youth they serve and their communities.

Culturally Insensitive Programs Within the Immediate Environment

Within their immediate program environment, youth workers identified sources of culturally insensitive programs that constrain relationship building with youth. Programs that devalue cultural interactions were seen as major constraints. For example, the communication norms of a program can demonstrate the presence or absence of culturally relevant programming in the immediate environment. A youth worker shared that many programs have culturally insensitive communication styles, saying, [programs] "Don't validate their style of communication or what undergirds what they communicate about." He discussed how programs who do not invest in culturally relevant means of communication with their young people, will not be able to form healthy and effective relationships with them. Such practices conflict with Principle II.d (ACYCP, 2022), which stresses the necessity of culturally sensitive and non-discriminatory services. The youth worker quoted above was referring to the difference between the communication style and motivations of Black youth that differ from some youth workers and program leaders. Another youth worker discussed this conflict, in terms of immigrant students whose first language was not English. "The language barrier has been an issue for me for some students because there is such a huge population of immigrants in the area that I'm working. So, that has been challenging because I feel like when you don't speak the same language and you're using a translator, you can't get as personal." Beyond culturally relevant communication, one youth worker remarked on the issue of paternalism within the immediate environment, stating, "They [some youth workers/youth programs] kind of come from this place of paternalistic control and dominance as a norm, as a central part of the framework that they use to approach working with young black folks."

Within this broader theme, *youth program cultures that devalue the cultures of youth or do not validate relevant interactions with youth are perceived by youth workers to be a source of culturally insensitive programming that constrains relationship development with youth.* Youth workers described situations where programs were centering on white cultural values and devaluing African American/Black cultural values held by the youth and families in the programs. Multiple interviews discussed cultural interactions that were explicitly or implicitly devalued by the immediate program environment. One such example lifted by multiple youth workers was programs only offering support through an individualistic model over community-care and mutual aid models. The youth workers expressed the importance and cultural relevance of also offering family and community outreach and support. One youth worker discussed needing to code switch within his role as a Black man working with Black boys within white-led organizations. He found the cultural norms around a Black "elder-youth relationship" devalued or misunderstood by former youth organizations. This organizational cultural insensitivity necessitated the youth worker to have to code-switch in his role. "I have to either not bring it up at all, or just re-think how I frame it. So that's very difficult because it requires me to kind of step out of what I know is real." Such accounts emphasize the need for an ethical commitment to fostering inclusivity and equity in youth programs (Principle III.e; ACYCP, 2022).

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Additionally, within this theme, the analysis found evidence that *the cultural values of youth and their families that conflict with the youth work program is perceived by youth workers to constrain relationship development with youth.* Multiple youth workers spoke to this conflict between programs that center white culture while their youth and families hold Black/ African American cultural identities. One youth worker deftly warned in their interview how this conflict in the immediate environment constrains relationship building with youth and families. He explained when white cultural norms, such as “paternalistic control and dominance [are adopted]as a norm, [and used] as a central part of the framework that they use to approach working with young black folks" the program then “necessitates the students participating to break a relationship with themselves to be part of it.” This underscores the ethical obligation to affirm the cultural identities of all participants (Principle II.i; ACYCP, 2022). His insights suggest that Black youth in these types of programs are torn between the desire to feel they belong in the immediate environment while not seeing themselves culturally represented within it.

Programs and their leadership that failed to validate relevant interactions and acted with cultural insensitivity toward the youth and youth workers were perceived by the study participants as hindering relationship development. It was emphasized that efforts to affirm and center cultural paradigms, particularly from African American/Black culture, are crucial. Youth workers who experienced these cultural ethics issues inside or beyond the immediate environment often found themselves engaged in mediation between the cultural environment impacting youth programs and the youth, by creating space for individuality of the youth and decentering or leveraging their own experiences.

Engaging and Mediating the Cultural Environment

Youth workers negotiated cultural ethics issues by engaging and mediating between the cultural environment impacting youth programs and youth. They developed culturally responsive practices by understanding their own positionality and associated experiences. One white youth worker reflected, "I'm aware of my own privilege… questions that could have been asked to me as a teenager that wouldn't be threatening because of privilege in my own culture that might be threatening to someone else." The youth worker described that as a white person she would not have to wonder about the motivations behind a youth worker asking about who lives in her home or other questions about family structure. “...like [a] who lives in your house question.” A Black male youth worker discussed leveraging his shared identities and life experiences with the young men in his program to inform how he navigated issues that arose between the program and young men in his program.

It [being a Black-led program with predominantly Black youth workers] makes building those relationships a lot easier when they [Black youth] can see, hey, you know, everybody in this program or attached to this program looks like me… comes from a similar background as me

He went on to explain that they are more likely to engage and feel comfortable because youth identity is represented in programming and leadership. This aligns with Principle II.f (ACYCP, 2022), which calls for fostering self-determination and personal agency. Successful culturally responsive interventions can involve negotiating cultural differences between the systems in the young person’s immediate environment. For example, one youth worker spoke about navigating cultural issues between her youth’s school culture, which was more punitive, and the youth’s holistic program culture. In this antidote, the youth worker was able to mediate the issue by advocating for the youth and centering both systems’ shared goal on the young person’s wellbeing.

Training and Professional Development Support

Youth workers negotiated cultural ethics issues through participation in training relevant to youth work and by receiving professional development support from supervisors and other youth workers. Workers emphasized the importance of selecting training topics aligned with their needs and youth cultures, consistent with Principle I.b (ACYCP, 2022), which encourages ongoing professional development in trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices. Training selected with youth worker feedback was emphasized to avoid unhelpful professional development opportunities. Multiple youth workers discussed their experiences of unhelpful professional development experiences that originated from funder or program leader priorities and not youth worker needs. They spoke on the crucial nature of youth voice and youth worker voice in deciding professional development

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topics. When youth workers were asked which topics their programs could benefit from, they frequently suggested relationally aligned topics. Two youth workers explicitly highlighted the importance of training that includes cultural differences and relevant practices for those serving youth from different cultural backgrounds. Advocating for this type of training represents an important avenue that youth workers take in increasing their program's ability to respond to cultural ethics issues and adopt more culturally relevant practices.

Using Ethical Values for Authentic Relationships

Youth workers negotiated cultural ethics issues by using ethical values as a guide for authentic and supportive relationships with youth in youth programs. They often felt a personal responsibility to address organizational shortcomings, emphasizing the importance of building genuine, trusting relationships with youth. One worker stressed, "You're growing human beings, you're helping human beings overcome their stress, their trauma, their struggles, and you're supporting them to find their own path." Approaching ethical dilemmas, youth workers frequently used their ethical values as a guide to build authentic and supportive relationships with youth. This approach reflects Principles II.a and II.e (ACYCP, 2022), which focus on promoting safe, respectful, and empowering practices. Authenticity was frequently cited as a crucial aspect of building a rapport with youth that allows them to develop the trust needed to navigate cultural ethics issues. One youth worker noted that professional culture asks them to leave their authentic self behind, but being able to integrate the authentic self is crucial.

As an African American in professional setting ...the going culture is that you kind of have to leave yourself behind and show up as a worker before you show up as yourself… When we're able to bring that part of ourselves with us… that helps me a lot.

Many youth workers discussed setting boundaries to deal with cultural ethics issues when their personal or professional values clashed with the values of youth. The youth workers described both internal and external boundary setting within the program and relationships. In the anecdotes provided by the youth workers, the worker's values such as youth safety, respect, and role expectations at times clashed with some youth's values that included lack of respect for authority, substance use, and risk taking. For example, one youth worker working with a program that centered youth leadership/agency, faced difficulties enforcing boundaries. There was a situation involving a 24- or 25-year-old who was selling drugs, primarily marijuana, within the program. The youth worker set clear boundaries, explicitly prohibiting the older individual from selling or smoking with the 15-year-olds, regardless of their personal behaviors or purchases from other sources. The older participant did not adhere to them. "I was uncomfortable in my own space. I felt disrespected because here's the boundary, right?" She went on to discuss the internal conflict between her personal values of control and safety and the value of autonomy held by the program and the young people in the program. Holding a boundary between her personal values and those of the program and youth allowed her to navigate this conflict without disrupting relationship development. Another youth worker discussed holding a boundary around her role in the program to ensure she was showing up authentically in her relationships with youth. She suggested training in appropriate boundaries would be helpful because

in terms of like a student sharing that dealing with food insecurity, it's hard to know what my role is in that… and sort of trying to balance the feeling of white saviorism....I know that this person has this issue I have to be the one to like fix it all and knowing that it's just more complicated than that.

In this workers example, she perceives that professional boundaries may need to be negotiated/navigated across different situations, all while managing personal biases. Such reflections underscore the importance of ethical boundary management as outlined in Principle II.k (ACYCP, 2022).

Summary of Findings

Despite the alignment of the findings with the Standards for Practice outlined in the 2022 Code of Ethics, no youth workers interviewed explicitly mentioned a Code of Ethics as a guiding document in their practice. This

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absence suggests that youth workers may rely more heavily on their personal values and lived experiences as guides in ethical decision-making rather than referencing formalized codes. This observation raises important considerations about how the Code is disseminated, understood, and integrated into everyday youth work practices.

Beyond authenticity and trust, the youth workers frequently mentioned their personal ethical values of respect and youth agency. By operating within these values, the youth workers perceived greater investment and communication from the youth in the programming. These relationships, formed through leveraging youth worker values, can create the strong rapport needed to proficiently navigate cultural ethics challenges as they arise in youth programming. In summary, the results of this study underscore the significant impact of culturally insensitive program structures and policies on youth workers and their ability to foster meaningful relationships with the youth they serve.

External constraints, such as funding requirements and national policies, and institutional cultures contrary to youth work values, often undermine culturally relevant programming, leading to strained relationships. Within immediate program environments, youth workers identified paternalistic and Eurocentric practices that devalue the cultural values of African American/Black youth, necessitating code-switching and mediation by the workers. Despite these challenges, youth workers recommend actively negotiating cultural ethics issues by leveraging their own experiences and positionalities, advocating for culturally responsive practices, and participating in targeted training and professional development. Authenticity, trust, and ethical values emerge as perceived crucial elements in building strong, supportive relationships that help navigate cultural ethics issues effectively and allow youth to thrive. These findings highlight the need for systemic changes to support culturally relevant and ethically sound youth work practices. These systemic changes could encourage practices that the youth workers in this study have found impactful such as culturally relevant professional development opportunities and encouraging youth worker voice in programmatic design making around policy creation.

Discussion

Our thematic analysis produced five major themes that highlight the complexities of culturally insensitive programs and how youth workers navigate these issues. The first two themes identify external and internal sources of culturally insensitive programs, including institutional cultures and policies that clash with youth needs, and program cultures that devalue youth's cultural identities, all of which constrain relationship-building with youth. The remaining themes focus on youth workers' responses to these challenges: engaging and mediating between conflicting cultural environments, participating in relevant training and professional development, and using ethical values to build authentic and supportive relationships. Many youth workers emphasized personal authenticity and trust as central to fostering meaningful connections with youth. Additionally, the testimonies of youth workers suggested that systemic changes are necessary to support these practices and address the broader impact of culturally insensitive structures. These findings suggest youth workers perceive culturally relevant professional development and the inclusion of youth worker voices in program design and policy creation as critical elements in addressing culturally insensitive programs.

Influence of Culture on Youth Work

This study's findings align with studies that highlight the positive impact of shared cultural backgrounds between youth workers and youth (Dolamore & Naylor, 2018; Forrester, 2021b; O'Heaney, 2018; Rubin et al., 2021). The youth workers in the current study perceived their shared cultural backgrounds with the youth in their program as both an asset in rapport building and navigating the cultural ethics issues they encountered. Youth workers provided personal evidence that culturally relevant programming is in the best interest of youth and their families. While developmental outcomes were not explored in this study, this finding does align with previous literature that found culturally relevant programming contributes to positive developmental outcomes (Grills et al., 2017; Loyd & Williams, 2017; McMahon et al., 2023; Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022).This study also revealed the challenges and negative impacts of cultural mismatch or insensitivity, such as burnout, racism, and inequitable power dynamics (Kim, 2018; Smith & Soule, 2016; Debrosse et al., 2023; Kennedy, 2018; McKamey, 2017; Ralph, 2014). Youth workers perceived the influences of white supremacy in both the policy environment and immediate program environment. Specifically, youth workers in this study perceived that the associated elements of perfectionism, quantity over quality, and paternalism (Okun, 2001) created challenges in programming and

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program policies that resulted in constraints in relationship building. One youth worker discussed how this cultural mismatch can lead to a young person feeling they need to "break the relationship" with their own identity to feel they belong in the program. This study's findings, unlike Galipeau and Giles (2014) and Duron et al. (2020) primarily highlighted the negative impacts or challenges of culture rather than some of the positive elements within programs that serve Youth of Color but operate under White cultural norms. These findings (related to the influence of culture on youth work) suggest the importance of organizations creating space for both the youth and youth workers to openly talk about their cultural experiences, including how these experiences impact their interpersonal relationships and participation in programming.

Multisystem Cultural Ethics Issues in Youth Programs

The study's findings align with the bio-ecological framework. Three themes found in the study occur in various systems of the youth program environment. The first study theme speaks to cultural insensitivities that occur outside the immediate environment of the youth program. Youth workers perceived instances of cultural insensitivity from other related institutions (mesosystem), such as the schools that serve as key partners for the programs. Multiple youth workers experienced cultural clashes between their school partners and programs. The first theme also addressed broader social systems that indirectly affect the youth (exosystem). Youth workers perceived aspects of the exosystem (e.g., government policies and funder requirements) as contributing to cultural insensitivity and constraining relationship building with youth. The second theme discusses cultural insensitivities that occur in the immediate (micro) environment. At this level, youth workers expressed that program cultures can devalue the cultures of the youth and result in culturally insensitive programming. The youth workers perceived conflict between the program's cultural values and the youth and their families as a strain on their relationship development with youth. The youth workers also discussed the impacts of white supremacy, an element of the macrosystem and chronosystem on both the policy environment and immediate youth program environment. Youth worker perceptions that a societal injustice, like white supremacy, negatively impacts youth work practice provides some support for the adoption of the Critical Positive Youth Development framework. This framework provides guidance for how youth workers and youth can engage in actions that lead to more ethically and culturally sensitive practices with marginalized youth (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Youth workers in our study affirmed this need for macrosystem level change when they alluded to the need for better youth program policies that would allow for culturally relevant programming based on the lived experiences of youth and the youth workers who interacted with them. Incorporating both youth and youth workers into organizational decision making and policy development would be an important step in beginning to address cultural disconnects – given that this inclusion is authentic and not performative. In summary, this study aligns with previous research in that it demonstrates the influence of different environmental systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) on youth workers' experiences and actions (Forrester, 2021a; Forrester, 2021b; Burns et al., 2015).

Ethical Dilemmas and Responses

The perceptions of the youth workers in this study provide further evidence and context to the ethical dilemmas faced by youth workers when cultural values clash. Similar to the findings of Pope (2016), youth workers discussed a cultural clash with the external environment. While in Pope (2016) the political culture was at odds with the youth worker culture, the youth workers in this study spoke more frequently to the school culture clashing with the program culture especially concerning matters of student discipline. Multiple youth workers perceived the school culture as more "punitive" and less holistic than their program environment. Those interviewed found themselves in ethical dilemmas from this conflict and reported it as a barrier to relationship development with youth. This study also found that cultural clashes in communication also can lead to ethical dilemmas and relationship constraints, aligning with Erlen's (1998) literature review and commentary on cultural ethics issues in US healthcare and Mengesha et al.'s (2018) study of healthcare workers' perceptions of providing sexual and reproductive health to refugee and migrant women in Australia. Our study added to this literature in health care by sharing culture clashes in communication within youth programs. One youth worker, a Black man working with Black youth at a white-led program, felt the need for frequent code switching within his role to conform to the program culture. He also shared how programs frequently mischaracterize cultural communication clashes with youth: "What people write off as a lack of communication or lack of communication skill is really just you don't speak people's language, or you don't validate their style of communication or what undergirds what they communicate about." The youth workers in this study reported experiencing cultural ethics issues within and

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outside the immediate program environment. In response to these cultural ethics issues, youth workers employed proactive strategies, including engaging and mediating between the cultural environment and youth, developing culturally responsive practices, and advocating for culturally relevant training and professional development. They emphasized the importance of authenticity, trust, and respect in building supportive relationships, using their own ethical values as guides. By leveraging their shared identities and life experiences, youth workers navigated cultural differences and advocated for systemic changes to support culturally relevant and ethically sound youth work practices. These efforts highlight the need for policies and programmatic decisions that reflect the cultural needs and experiences of the youth they serve.

Strengths and Limitations

There are both strengths and limitations to this study. The authors' analysis and interpretation of the data may not have elicited all the youth workers' real views on the topic but could have been more of a reflection of the authors' projected experiences. To mitigate this, we centered the perspectives of youth workers during the analysis process and presented youth workers' direct quotes, when possible, in the Findings section. This study is novel in its focus on US based youth workers' perceptions of and responses to cultural ethics issues impacting their work with youth in programs. Findings can provide contextualized information for policy makers, funders, and program administrators on relevant policies needed to support the work of promoting healthy youth development that is ethical. Multiple research team perspectives (e.g., different youth work experiences, study roles, levels of research experience, social identities) were useful during thematic analysis to triangulate data, increasing study trustworthiness and rigor (Padgett, 2017). The first author's direct recruitment of youth workers was another strength of the study. We believe that youth workers were more likely to participate due to their true interest in the study topic rather than as a requirement of their job. This approach could allow for youth workers to share more honest feelings on the study topic, particularly as it related to program constraints on their work and recommendations for program improvements. A limitation of this study is that youth worker perspectives on the study topic were restricted to one city in the US and did not account for all types of youth programs, youth worker roles, and social identities (Forrester, 2021b). The last author, who was not involved in research analysis or interpretation, acted as a peer reviewer to help establish greater credibility of the findings. This study did not explore alternative perspectives of adolescents and young adults directly affected by youth worker interventions. These alternate perspectives could have been compared to the perspectives of youth workers and provided more comprehensive understanding of cultural ethics issues and its relation to youth experiences in programs.

Implications

There are some implications from our study that may be useful for policy makers, funders, and youth program administrators. Youth workers related that irrelevant program policies negatively affected their abilities in developing relationships with youth. This finding highlights the ethical importance of ensuring culturally sensitive and non-discriminatory policies, as emphasized in Principle II.d of the Code of Ethics (ACYCP, 2022). It would be useful for policy makers to involve youth workers and youth and their families in the process of policy development. This process could be done through discussions with relevant youth program stakeholders and eliciting feedback on culturally relevant policies that would support ethical interactions with youth. This aligns with Principle V.e of the Code of Ethics, which advocates for stakeholder engagement in shaping policies to ensure they reflect the needs and voices of those directly impacted. Policy makers should also ensure that they allow impacted parties to review their policy drafts so that stakeholder feedback is incorporated. Youth program cultures, inclusive of policies and structures, should validate and acknowledge the cultures and life experiences of the youths and families being served so that the youth and youth workers of those cultures feel welcomed into the program and feel free to be their whole selves. This approach also accords with ethical standards for youth work practice as relates to culture:

1) Principle and Standard II.d. Ensures services are culturally sensitive, decolonizing, and non-discriminatory;

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2) Principle and Standard II.i.iii. Adapts to individual needs when designing and implementing plans and programs (including developmental, intellectual, psychological, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual needs)

(Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, 2022, p. 6).

Additionally, program administrators should ensure that their youth worker recruitment process is inclusive of individuals that have similar life experiences or demographics to the youth being served. This approach aligns with Principle III.a of the Code of Ethics, which emphasizes equitable organizational practices to promote inclusivity and effectiveness in youth work. Many youth workers mentioned that youth workers of similar backgrounds to youth helped facilitate culturally relevant interactions that supported youth needs. Of note, one White youth worker in a program serving minoritized youth shared that youth workers of the same cultural backgrounds as the youth being served were helpful in supporting his abilities in engaging youths' cultures as part of his practice. He shared that he learned about youths' cultures and how to relate better with youth through on-the-job training and collegial interactions with other youth workers who had similar cultures to the youth. Like this youth worker, youth workers in general would benefit from professional development through training regarding how to ethically engage different cultures and how to respond appropriately to cultural ethics issues to maintain healthy relationships with youth. Youth workers may also use this study's findings in tandem with other research as a resource to advocate for program policies and structures, that may better support ethical youth work practice with adolescents and young adults promotive of healthy development. This advocacy aligns with ethical commitments outlined in Principle II.d of the Code of Ethics, which emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive and non-discriminatory practices, ensuring that youth work programs foster inclusive and responsive environments for healthy growth and development. Future research conducted on cultural ethics in youth work should recruit youth workers of diverse backgrounds from a range of youth work programs and locations. Additionally, adolescents and young adults who have been or are currently involved in youth programs should be invited to participate in studies exploring cultural ethics issues in youth work practice. Adolescents and young adults could share their views on how youth workers can address cultural ethics issues appropriately.

Conclusion

We explored youth workers' perspectives on challenges to relationships with youth due to program structures and policies relevant to culture. Our study's findings highlight the need for both youth and youth workers to be involved in the development and implementation of funding, social, and program policies that directly affect youth programming. This should be done to ensure ethical and culturally relevant interactions between youth and youth workers. Individuals in the youth work field can use this study's methods and findings as a basis for further exploration of youth worker and youth perspectives in various US locations, on necessary policies and cultural environments needed to promote ethical and culturally relevant youth work practice for healthy youth development.

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Figure 1: Bio-Ecological Framework with Complementary Critical Positive Youth Development Framework

Note. Youth workers reside within a bio-ecological environment made up of many levels. They both impact and are impacted by the environment.

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Table 1

Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Years Worked at Current Program	Program Role
Alan	Black/African American	32	2	Program Manager & Instructor
Ann	African nation	38	9	Program Director
Anthony	Bi-racial	25	5	Program Manager
Crystal	Black/African American	43	8	Program Director
Gretel	White/Caucasian & European nations	54	3	Program Coordinator
Jane	White/Caucasian	57	22	Executive Director
Jenee	Black/African American	33	4	Program Strategist
Lotus	Black/African American	24	2	Program Director
Melissa	Black/African American & Caribbean	35	2	Program Manager
Miles	White/Caucasian	36	1.8	Chief Operations Officer
Sara	White/Caucasian	31	8	Program Instructor
Steve	Black/African American	35	3	Chief Program Officer
Susan	White/Caucasian	37	1.2	Program Manager

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