Similarity-Attraction and Old-School Values: African American-Led Nonprofits and African American Youth

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This article examines the role of similarity-attraction between African American-led nonprofits and the predominately African American youth they serve. Informed by interview data with executive directors, board members, volunteers, and students, this research captures how similarity-attraction operates in the context of three, well-established African American-led nonprofit organizations by utilizing an old-school values approach. The findings suggest that each of these programs provides a direct focus on African American history and positive role models. Further, these programs teach African American youth how to excel while being black, from people who know first-hand what that experience entails. Nonprofit program leaders become trusted sources of advice and, ultimately, build self-confidence in the youth they serve. Given the limited research that focuses on African American-led nonprofits, this research illuminates an important, understudied area in nonprofit studies.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2016), there are about 1.5 million registered nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations in the United States. A 2004 study on nonprofit executive leadership by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 84 percent of nonprofit executives are white, while only 10 percent are African American, and 4 percent are Hispanic or Latino (Teegarden, 2004). A recent report commissioned by the Philadelphia African American Leadership Forum included surveys with 145 executive directors in human service-oriented nonprofits in Philadelphia, including 74 African American leaders (Branch Associates 2016). Their research compared African American and white executive directors. Importantly, the study found that African American-led and white-led organizations serve different populations. Specifically, "African American-led organizations are more likely to serve teens, African Americans, and low-income residents than white-led organizations"

(Branch Associates 2016, 6). They are also located in and serve low-income neighborhoods and help some of the neediest local populations. As the authors report, "Being located in the places where services are most needed makes the organizations more accessible to clients and allows them to become trusted members of the community" (Branch Associates, 2016, 6).

While many nonprofit organizations serve minority youth, this article examines the role of similarity-attraction between African American-led nonprofits and the predominantly African American youth they serve. Specifically, it describes how similarity-attraction operates in the context of three well-established African American-led nonprofit organizations by utilizing an old-school values approach. Given the limited research on African American-led nonprofits and their impact on African American youth, this article captures patterns across three organizations—Mama Foundation for the Arts, New Jersey Orators, and Reclaim a Youth of Illinois—that advance our understanding of the particular benefits such organizations may provide.

Similarity-attraction and Old School Values

Based in psychology, previous research suggests that the greater the attitudinal similarity between individuals, the greater the attraction between them (see for example, Bryne and Nelson 1965; Byrne 1971; Byrne, Clore, and Smeaton 1986). According to Bryne (1971), similar people are reinforcing, which is associated with positive feelings and attraction. Since individuals evaluate their own attributes positively, they also positively value these attributes in others. These qualities are assigned a weight or importance and impact positive interpersonal relationships (Montoya and Horton 2012). As related to race, Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest racial groupings allow an individual to organize his or her social environment and define himself or herself and others. In general, minorities are more attracted to organizations that prominently feature minority representatives than to organizations that feature majority representatives (Nu, Kulik, and Bordia 2015). Specific to youth and education, several studies found minority students have a strong preference for ethnically similar counselors (Abreu and Gabarain 2000; Kim and Atkinson 2002) and feel the similarity allows them to learn more deeply (Espinoza-Herold 2003).

Each of the three African American-led organizations included in this study are firmly rooted in the communities they serve and are dedicated to promoting positive values through their youth-focused programs. These values are rooted in the premise that culturally-based approaches to instruction can be effective in improving outcomes for youth. These leaders exhibit styles that are in touch with their larger community. "Leaders within organizations, by virtue of their position, formal authority, perceived and real power, and influence, routinely articulate strong messages to organizational members about what is important, what is unimportant, and what resides in the zone of indifference" (Gooden 2014, 70). The leadership within these three nonprofit organizations serve as a concentrated source of distinctive influence within the communities they serve.

Previous research (Schmid 2006; Boerner and Gebert 2012) suggests it is important for leaders to have styles that align with their unique circumstances. Moreover, African American-led nonprofit organizations recognize that there have always been individuals who can successfully teach the so-called "hard to reach" when others have failed. These types of educational interventions prioritize the centrality of race and racism, the value of experiential knowledge, the benefits of challenging the dominant perspective, a commitment to social justice, and an appreciation of interdisciplinary approaches (Hayes, Juarez, and Cross 2012).

Often African American-led nonprofits deliver youth services utilizing an old-school approach, a term commonly used in the U.S. South. Being old school is an attitude; it is an

expectation; and it is a demeanor. For example, an old-school teacher "is one with very high expectations, who believes that students should be pushed to their academic limits. Being an old school teacher is race neutral; any teacher can be old school. Being labeled an old school teacher is a badge of honor for many" (Hayes, Juarez, and Cross 2012, 11). While it may be considered to be "race neutral," the term is nonetheless commonly used within the African American community to denote the value of high expectations that are transmitted through earned respect. This is evidenced by sustained, long-term caring and investment in the best interest of the population being served. Leaders personify an organization and its motives (Avery, McKay, Wilson, and Tonidandel 2007) and their values are translated into the actions and behaviors of the nonprofit organizations.

Old-school values can be traced back to approaches used in segregated black K-12 schools, as well as historically black colleges and universities (Duncan 2009). As Former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan explained during the 2009 Historically Black Colleges and Universities conference,

> [T]he founders of HBCUs and their successors had an animating insight that helped tens of thousands of students begin to catch up and eliminate their academic gaps. HBCU advocates recognized that non-cognitive skills like perseverance, self-control, grit, punctuality, treating others with respect, the ability to defer gratification, and being well-spoken played a huge role in determining whether students persisted in college and would one day flourish on the job (Arne Duncan speech, September 2, 2009).

In this same spirit, old-school teachers do not view measures such as low standardized test scores or below average grades as determinative of future potential. Rather, they believe when students combine a strong desire to achieve and a supportive environment, they can often excel far beyond what cognitive testing suggests. This is further affirmed by evidence they have witnessed first-hand, including personal experience and/or the experiences of family members, friends, and community members.

Figure 1 applies an old-school relational model to this study. All three organizations assessed in this study are led by dedicated executive directors whose primary focus is to positively impact youth in their communities. Over time, these leaders establish mutually trusting relationships among their organizations, the youth they serve, and their parents or guardians. In their provision of free or low-cost services to the community, program leaders focus on instilling the following essential old-school values through their programmatic activities and youth interactions: high expectations, respect, encouragement and praise, and constructive criticism.

This emphasis on old-school values within these three nonprofit programs leads to a number of improved individual youth outcomes: improved self-esteem, increased self-confidence, application of conflict-resolution skills, and resiliency. These preliminary outcomes eventually result in improved long-term individual youth outcomes. By rooting their programmatic interactions in old-school values, these African American-led organizations are making long-term impacts on the academic success, behavioral success, and career success of their participants. The old-school model recognizes that academic achievement is, in and of itself, not a sufficient benchmark of success. Rather, their broader programmatic approach recognizes the importance of identifying with African American children by teaching them about their values and their cultural heritage—and in so doing

prepares them to effectively navigate the society and world in which they live (Lomotey 1992).

Figure 1 Old-School Model
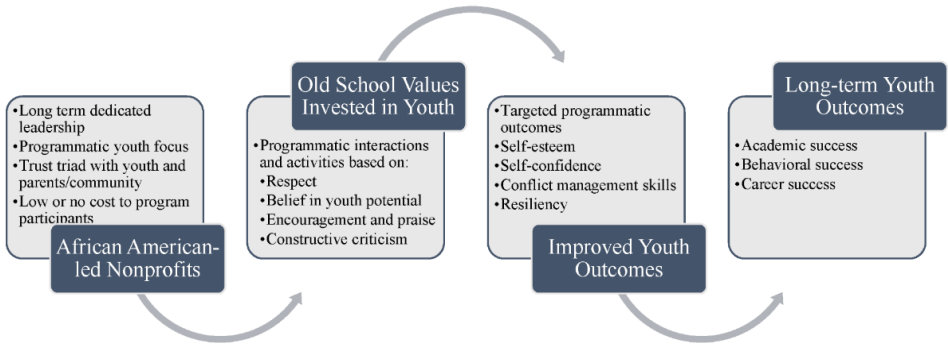
Overview of Nonprofits in this Study

The three nonprofit organizations included this analysis are: Mama Foundation for the Arts (MFA), New Jersey Orators (NJO), and Reclaim a Youth of Illinois (RAY). Each nonprofit was selected because they have been in existence for more than 20 years, and each organization has received local and national awards for their work. Located in Harlem, New York, and founded in 1998, MFA's mission is to present, preserve, and promote the history and fundamentals of gospel, jazz, and rhythm and blues music for current and future generations. Harlem has been a historical mecca of African American intellectual thought, culture, artistry, and businesses since the early twentieth century. Since its inception in 2006, their youth program, Gospel for Teens has served over 500 youth ages 13-19.

The founder and executive director of the Mama Foundation for the Arts has a long-standing history of creating positive change. Described as an author, playwright, radio and TV personality, she discovered that the music in many African American churches had not been written down and was vanishing from the cultural landscape. In the early days of MFA, the executive director was concerned that many of the local schools were either outsourcing or eliminating their music departments. Moreover, many of the programs that did exist were geared toward a European genre of music.

The New Jersey Orators (NJO) was founded in 1985 by five African American professionals who were concerned about the poor interviewing skills they saw in young African American candidates. Operating through 20 local chapters primarily based in New Jersey, NJO focuses on helping youth ages 7-18 learn the art of public speaking and effective communication. To date, they have served over 5,000 youth. The NJO founders were keenly aware that communication skills play a major role in achieving academic and career success. Importantly, NJO teaches the importance of cultural competency. A specific feature of NJO is the organization-wide focus on African American history. They highlight African American authors and poets, their history, and contributions to American literature.

Reclaim a Youth of Illinois was founded in 1991. Its mission is to empower youth ages 12-18 with basic values and affirm their individual talents to help build a healthy sense of self-worth and community. RAY is located in the Chicago area and has served over 2,000 youth. RAY implements their youth programs though a large group of dedicated, long-term board members, program directors, and volunteers who are all committed to the success of

the organization. Many of the individuals serving on RAY's board of directors are retired educators or seasoned professionals from a diverse group of industries/organizations who are truly committed to the development and success of community youth. RAY develops and implements programs to enhance and shape the lives of youth in their community through education and counseling. Over time, RAY's programming has evolved to meet the needs of youth and families within the greater Chicago area. Additionally, RAY holds an annual fundraising gala to acknowledge member achievements, including youth scholarship recipients and community partner contributions.

Congruent with the literature, the three nonprofits in this study serve predominantly African American youth. These programs have a long history of serving youth in their communities and are highly invested in their long-term success. They instill old-school values of self-confidence, cultural awareness, and high expectations. The programs promote high school completion and post-secondary credential attainment and/or employment, and realizing youth potential, while steering them away from negative influences, such as violence, crime, substance abuse, and poor academic performance.

Nonprofit Comparison Characteristics

Each of these organizations has a long history of service to their local metropolitan communities. Additionally, each of these organizations is led by a visionary African American female with strong ties to her community. The vast majority (nearly 80 percent) of the youth served by each of these programs is African American. Each nonprofit has a 501(c)(3) classification with a board governing its organizational structure. In addition to the required formal board of directors, each of the charitable organizations has an additional staff of volunteers who are actively engaged in the day-to-day operations and programmatic functions of the organization. The MFA has paid administrative and professional staff, in addition to volunteers. In comparison, NJO and RAY are more heavily reliant upon volunteers and board members respectively.

Each of these nonprofits channels their limited financial resources toward the youth they serve, as evidenced by a strong commitment to keeping each program free or low cost. Many of the operational differences for the organizations can be tied to their financial operations. On this measure, the MFA is probably better positioned because they have stronger financial resources—for example, the revenue stream from ticketed programmatic performances; the MFA also pays some staff and has already begun to engage in succession planning. In general, this supports previous research that minority nonprofits often lack capital compared to majority race nonprofits (Schneider 2003; Teegarden 2004).

Methodology

The study primarily uses a qualitative approach based on interviews with program executive directors, board members, and staff of three nonprofit organizations. The research design was approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board. From October 2015 to July 2016, we conducted on-site interviews with a total of 12 staff and observed two sessions at each of the three nonprofit organizations. Executive director interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. All other interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes. Additionally, we conducted individual or small group interviews with program participants during their senior year of high school. Interview sessions lasted about 15-20 minutes each and included a total of 35 student program participants. Student interview participants received a $10 gift card. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed for thematic patterns utilizing Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis package. In

addition to the qualitative data, we surveyed 94 youth across the three nonprofit organizations to capture their assessment of the program, both generally and specific to the mission of each nonprofit. We report average responses on these measures.

It is important to note that the data included in this study are best viewed as exploratory—designed to better illuminate the role of similarity-attraction in African American nonprofit organizations and the youth they serve. The findings are not generalizable but, rather, demonstrate how similarity-attraction through the use of old-school values operates in three African American-led nonprofit organizations. This is particularly important given the difficulty in identifying African American-led organizations and gaining subsequent access to them.

Findings

Our findings detail how similarity-attraction occurs through the implementation of old-school values. We then report student assessments of their programmatic experiences.

How Old-School Values Are Transmitted

Across all three nonprofit organizations, program leaders are well respected in their communities and are invested in the youth they serve. As one executive director commented, "We teach the power of the brain. Your brain can direct your path. You can choose to be on one side, and you have a choice, and your decisions are important. We use old-school principles." Similarly, a board member of RAY stated, "The more we disclose about the issues we've gone through, the more the guys and girls open up . . . It has a therapeutic effect."

Each of the nonprofits is led by adults who act like adults. They are not trying to become a buddy or pal of the youth that they serve. Rather, they share their own life experiences with authenticity and focus on the whole child, not just the specific programmatic focus area, such as singing or poetry. The adult experiences are often parallel to those of the youth. Moreover, they listen without judging their environment, but rather, they demonstrate an ability to understand it. A leader of MFA shared, "We don't promise them fame and fortune. We give them the opportunity to learn and be heard. We had a class called life . . . We talked about drugs, new drugs, we told stories, and they told us stories. We talked about gun violence. We talked about life." She continued, "Motown respected the stage. Every bird has a song to sing . . ." Similarly, a RAY leader noted, "We have very candid conversations on the realities of life and learning how to achieve your goals with realistic obstacles."

The African American-led nonprofit programs also know, value, and promote the African American experience. As a NJO senior leader stated, "Toastmasters is limited in it only teaches you how to properly deliver a speech . . . We teach them history, who African American authors and poets are. We teach them things about their own history that they aren't learning in schools. They have to learn the history and background of the pieces they recite. There is strong author recognition." Each of the programs discusses historical and contemporary intellectual and artistic stalwarts in the African American community, from the Harlem Renaissance to Civil Rights leaders to current local political leaders, educators, and other accomplished African Americans in their own communities. Not only do participants learn about historical African American artists, poets, and leaders, many of whom are not covered in their school curriculum, but they also have routine and sustained interactions with accomplished African American leaders they can see, talk with, and learn from. They see success before their eyes, from individuals who live and work in their shared community. In short, African American-led nonprofit organizations teach African American youth how to excel while being black, from someone who knows first-hand what that experience entails.

The executive directors, leaders, and volunteers simultaneously know the realities of discrimination, racism, and structural inequalities, but can also impart lessons, tips, and conflict resolution skills needed to move forward and achieve while navigating these ever-present obstacles.

The African American-led nonprofit organizations included in this analysis also report the importance of developing a trust triad among program leaders, student participants, and their parents. For example, the New Jersey Orators stress the importance of parental involvement. Parents are encouraged to attend the sessions each week. As one NJO instructor notes, "Most of my parents are here [during the practices]. They listen to the presentations, to the critique. We are all here, and it's about the betterment of the child . . . With the parent [being] there, the kids know their parent is interested in them." A RAY volunteer also discussed the impact these expectations often have on parents. "We teach them to replace negative words, such as 'shut up,' with positive words. We find that the parents themselves transform. They take the skills, and some come back saying they got promotions at work . . . Affirming is a way of creating the person you want to be."

Some of the biggest changes the nonprofit leaders report seeing in the student participants are in the areas of self-confidence. For example, the executive director of MFA explained, "I see changes from 'I can't' to 'I can,' from shyness to bold or less shy." The research team observed similar changes in youth between the first visits to the programs and our follow-up visits six months later. For example, some student mannerisms changed from looking down to maintaining eye contact and speaking with confidence, rather than approaching conversations with reservation or reluctance. It is important to note that in comparing the three programs, some of the fundamental youth outcomes from each of these nonprofits are difficult to measure. Emblematic of this, one of the requirements in the MFA program asks the freshmen youth to introduce themselves on the first day by stating their name and where they live. Some students are barely audible and keep their head down when introducing themselves. However, by the end of the semester, these same students are transformed into confident individuals who speak in a commanding voice, hold their head high, and consistently make eye contact. This is an important example that captures the impact that the organization is having in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem—but one that is not typically assessed on standard surveys and scale measures.

Student Assessments

Table 1 details student perceptions on multiple dimensions associated with each of the African American-led nonprofit programs: MFA, NJO, and RAY. Across all the programs, students viewed them positively, particularly in terms of program staff, acceptance within the program, and overall comfort within the program. Students also commonly believed that the programs increased their self-confidence and their life skills. Among the three programs, students in the Mama Foundation for the Arts participants rated their program the highest.

Additionally, we captured student perceptions of each program, relative to their specific mission. The Mama Foundation of the Arts' Gospel for Teens program was assessed along four specific program measures: knowledge of the history of gospel music; knowledge of the artistic culture of Harlem; vocal abilities; and live performance skills. As indicated in Table 2, MFA students rated their program experience very favorably.

MFA youth also spoke about their programmatic experiences in ways that aligned with traditional old-school values of creating a supportive, family-type environment that emphasizes community, accessibility, caring, and mutual respect. As one MFA youth expressed, "[The leaders] care about us. [The executive director] wants to hear our stories.

She is like a mother." Another youth agreed, stating, "There's a level of intimacy here. You don't get that in other organizations. I can go in and talk to [the executive director] anytime." In turn, the participants clearly respected the Mama Foundation for the Arts and recognized the importance of representing the organization well. "We are supposed to represent Gospel for Teens at its best and have to uphold a certain behavior that represents the best of what we want to be and who we are as people. We don't want to dismantle any relationships the program has."

Table 3 reports youth perceptions of the New Jersey Orators along four program specific measures: knowledge of literature; knowledge of African American history and leaders; public speaking skills; and general ability to verbally express oneself. Student perceptions of NJO were more favorable on the two dimensions directly related to public speaking, which is the program's primary focus area.

Several of the NJO participants linked the programs' vocabulary to their academic work. As one participant noted, "It [NJO] helped me. I was always academically below average, especially in English. It helped me to understand more. If I didn't know [the definition of a word], my mom helped me to look it up in the dictionary."

Table 1 Student Perception of African American-led Nonprofit Programs

Survey Items	MFA	NJO	RAY	Average
I feel comfortable at this program	4.39	3.90	4.03	4.12
I feel I am a part of this program	4.47	3.74	3.97	4.08
I am committed to this program	4.41	3.53	3.93	3.97
I feel supported at this program	4.38	3.83	3.90	4.05
I am accepted at this program	4.41	3.97	4.04	4.15
I like my program directors/assistants	4.56	4.07	3.97	4.22
My program directors/assistants make learning interesting	4.59	3.83	3.96	4.15
Participation in this program increased my self-confidence	4.56	4.03	3.96	4.20
Participation in this program increased my life skills	4.56	3.93	3.93	4.16
Sample Size	34	31	29	94

Note: Survey responses were based on a 1-5 Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree

Table 2 Youth Assessment of Program Specific Outcomes, Mama Foundation for the Arts

Survey Items	MFA
Participation in Gospel for Teens increased my knowledge of the history of gospel music	4.67
Participation in Gospel for Teens increased my knowledge of Harlem artistic culture	4.64
Participation in Gospel for Teens enhanced my vocal abilities	4.71
Participation in Gospel for Teens increased my live performance skills	4.74
Average number of years of participation	2.14
Sample Size	34

Note: Survey responses were based on a 1-5 Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree

Table 3 Youth Assessment of Program Specific Outcomes, New Jersey Orators

Survey Items	NJO
Participation in NJO increased my knowledge of literature	4.03
Participation in NJO increased my knowledge of African American history and leaders	3.97
Participation in NJO increased my public speaking skills	4.24
Participation in NJO increased my ability to express myself verbally in general	4.10
Average number of years of participation	3.01
Sample Size	31

Note: Survey responses were based on a 1-5 Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree

Finally, we analyzed the perceptions of the student members of RAY along four program specific measures: knowledge of social etiquette and self-presentation; knowledge of college; knowledge of career options; and conflict resolution skills. As listed in Table 4, RAY students evaluated the program the highest on the areas directly related to their program focus areas—namely, preparing students for college and a secure economic future.

Table 4 Youth Assessment of Program Specific Outcomes, Reclaim A Youth

Survey Items	RAY
Participation in RAY increased my knowledge of social etiquette and self-presentation	3.97
Participation in RAY increased my knowledge of college	3.86
Participation in RAY increased my knowledge of career options	4.00
Participation in RAY increased my conflict resolution skills	3.79
Average number of years of participation	1.82
Sample Size	26

Note: Survey responses were based on a 1-5 Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree

RAY students also commented on the overall positive environment of the program and the strengths and accessibility of their program leaders. A RAY participant noted, "[A RAY instructor] interacts with us. He asks us our opinion, and he gets all those different types of situations—home, school, jobs, relationships . . . It's like you get help in all of those different areas."

Discussion

Within each of the African American-led nonprofit programs profiled in this study, two primary themes emerge in terms of program outcomes. First, each of the programs provides a direct focus on positive African American history and role models. Whether it is through oratory poetry, gospel music, or the opportunity to interact with community leaders, students are exposed to an African American-centered environment and curriculum. This observation supports prior research linking an Afrocentric curricular focus to higher self-esteem and better academic performance among African American students (Lomotey 1992). Second, each group of African American-led program participants views the programs positively, especially in terms of the investment of time by program leaders, who they considered to be respectful, caring, and genuinely concerned about their well-being.

Perhaps most importantly, program leaders are overwhelmingly viewed as trusted sources of advice. This finding suggests that whether accolades or criticisms, the feedback that students receive is taken to heart and can operate as important builders of self-confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, they demonstrate similarity-attraction manifested by their transmission of old-school values of encouragement and praise, as well as constructive criticism. As such, they have significant credibility among the youth they serve, as well as their parents and the wider community.

Conclusion

African American-led nonprofits are important, understudied organizations relative to the development of African American youth. Under the guidance of caring, dedicated, and

committed leaders, the youth served by African American-led organizations develop trusted relationships with individuals who are similar in terms of race and community of residence. These organizations serve youth using an old-school values approach, stressing the importance of high expectations and personal demeanor, while also clearly demonstrating long-term commitment and sincere belief in students' future potential. Their nonprofit leaders have an unwavering commitment to their youth and are highly respected sources of influence and authority within their communities.

While this research is limited to an examination of three African American-led nonprofit organizations—Mama Foundation for the Arts, New Jersey Orators, and Reclaim a Youth of Illinois—this study suggests that these types of organizations may provide a vital resource for positive youth development within largely African American communities.

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