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American Identity: Impact of Youths' Differential Experiences in Society on Their Attachment to American Ideals

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Abstract

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Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Developmental Psychology | Family, Life Course, and Society | Other American Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology of Culture

Comments

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This article examines the problem of national and civic detachment among American youth. Using a developmental theoretical framework that integrates the ecological aspects of development with the phenomenological experiences of the developing individual, I argue that young Americans have difficulty developing an attachment to their identity as Americans due to contradictory experiences had between daily events and communicated perspectives and beliefs about America. The espoused story of America contains historical distortions, which we set as socializing adults and the collective context for youth development. Youth changes require that adults first confront the noted distortions in our own understanding of America before imposing American identity expectations on our youth. In order to do this, I propose that American society needs forums for civil discourse that can occur among groups with shared social experiences, to address these distortions in a safe space before engaging with those who have a different perspective on and experience with American society.

The ideals that America is founded on, that are at the heart of American identity, were designed to ensure a free and equal society in which all individuals have the right and opportunity to pursue their own vision of happiness and success. Despite this broad democratic ideology, there is evidence of disparity in how young people in America develop attachment to these ideals and to their national identity (Rubin, 2007). Furthermore, as described by Malin in this issue, research suggests a correlation between national identity and civic participation, and so the disparity in attachment to these national ideals is potentially an important source of inequitable political participation and representation in American society. The goal of this article is to examine the problem of lacking or even negative national identification among many youth. It approaches this problem from a developmental and contextual perspective by looking at the impact of history on present day challenges to national attachment in America, and also by examining the social contexts that serve as the setting for identity formation for many young Americans.

In many ways this article functions as an essay. Several of the issues raised and remedies suggested have been infrequently acknowledged as representing 21st century American dilemmas (see Spencer, 2008a). Further, some themes might well require an independent research paper to demonstrate the salience as background for current social challenges facing the nation. Unlike South African reconciliation efforts following the end of apartheid and related long-term South African tragedies, America has remained

silent on contemporary implications of the transatlantic crossing, slavery, and other abuses. For the most part, the undergirding historical events and their contributions to unexamined philosophical stances concerning diverse peoples' American experiences remain unexamined as factors influencing the conduct of the social sciences, the training of professionals (most notably teachers), and the framing of national policy. If this chapter of America's history influential for contemporary life were not invisible, included here would be factual accounts exploring why and how the United States of America participated in and prolonged the actual disbandment of slavery; the representation of America's accrued benefits due to slaves and slavery, as well as the inadequate 20th century mishandling of integration; the implications of the silencing of historical representations of American slavery for the conduct of science, the funding of same, and its practice as educational reform; and, finally, the candid reporting and representation of the nation's history and strategically accrued privileges as supports for the ongoing reports of disparities (e.g., in education, health status, longevity). The problematic historical gaps are linked to the remedies suggested and their novel character. In many ways, the proposals to be suggested as remedies represent practices for coping with the dilemma of unacknowledged privileges for some Americans and the socially constructed chronically disadvantaging situations for others.

Accordingly, given the lack of candid discourse surrounding the nation's 19th and 20th century historical accounts available for 21st civics lessons provided America's youth, the particular analysis taken is different. It suggests the need for novel solutions based upon our understanding of context-dependent human development particularly when the settings for human development for a nation's youth are unequal albeit unacknowledged as such. The historical shortsightedness suggests particular questions needing responses before the steps toward forging an American identity can be discerned. What is the social context in which young Americans are developing civic and national identity? How does that context impact American identity formation and attachment to American ideals? And following on that, what solutions can be posed to maximize the development of a robust and constructive identification with the democratic ideals of America?

DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORKS

The challenges to this problem, from a developmental perspective, are two-fold. First, there is the question of how to attain the outcome of constructive national identity for young people. Important identity formation processes take place during adolescence, including the formation of ideological identifications such as attachment to one's country and the values it rests on (Erikson, 1968). The second challenge is about us. How do we, as the adult socializing agents and models who provide the developmental context for young people, determine how they will develop attachment to country? For many American youth today, the social context provided for their development continues to represent what Chestang's (1972) classic statement refers to as a hostile environment. Young African American males, for example, live in a social context that denies them opportunities to express their competencies, of which they are well aware (Stevenson, 1997; Spencer, 2006, 2008b). Such a developmental context cannot be conducive to positive attachment to the ideas and institutions that lay at the heart of American identity. The question, then, is how can we change ourselves in ways that will provide a more positive developmental context for all young people? And, specifically, what must

change if we are to provide a social environment in which youth can develop positive national identity as a component of broader psychosocial processes?

Given these challenges, there are some key theoretical frameworks that can be used to examine these questions from a developmental, culturally sensitive, and contextual perspective. First, looking at the state of American identity among young people requires understanding what identity theory says about developing national identity in adolescence. According to identity theory, adolescence is an ideological period, when a young person seeks to identify with a belief system, especially one provided by society (Erikson, 1968). Adolescence is also the time when physical, psychological, and social developments coalesce into a pathway that will take the young person into adulthood, making it an important time for exploring and committing to a constructive and meaningful belief system (Marcia, 1980). The principles upon which America is founded—equality, justice, liberty, and opportunity for all—offer young citizens a potentially powerful ideology to guide them in developing a meaningful belief system based on national identity. The question addressed in this article is whether or not that potential is being realized in America today, and if not, what is preventing young people in America from attaching to these ideals?

Development is not strictly an individual process, but occurs as an interaction between individuals and their context. Theoretical frameworks that contextualize the individual's development are particularly relevant to understanding how young people develop national identity, because the social context is an important determinant of how that development will unfold. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) sees development as occurring in the relationship between individuals and the various environmental contexts— or ecologies—in which they participate. An individual's development is shaped and influenced by those ecologies, so the environments that they participate in matter both for their current state as well as for their developmental path. Taking this concept further, the PVEST (Phenomenological Variant on Ecological Systems Theory) framework (Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008b) integrates ecological systems theory with the phenomenological experience of the individual, as a way to understand how the individual interacts with the context to forge a unique developmental path. The framework emphasizes how the developing person, as a function of social cognitive development, uses ''social data'' obtained in everyday life to make responsive decisions and engage in coping processes given unavoidable developmental tasks and normative and non-normative challenges. The PVEST framework explains how development takes shape in the bidirectional relationships between individuals and their environment. A social setting provides different experiences for an individual, depending on the individual's physical and personal characteristics. At the same time, individuals perceive and experience social settings in different ways and act on their context according to how they experience it, their prior understandings of it, and expectations from and for it. How a person responds and develops in a life context depends on how they perceive, infer, make assumptions about, and cope in that context. The fit between individual and context is important, then, because it determines how the individual perceives, infers, and copes in the world.

This framework presupposes that all humans are vulnerable and possess both risks and protective factors. As lives unfold across contexts, risks are translated into normative and non-normative challenges, and, in parallel fashion, protective factors provide a variety of supports. Obviously, in naming just a few sources, the content and etiology of one's level of vulnerability may be different given

individuals' diverse histories, individual biological and psychological attributes, phenotypic characteristics, and contemporary experiences. Accordingly, the framework provides a perspective which is important for understanding whether and how individual young people will form attachment to their country. It explains how individuals have different experiences in the same context, based on how they perceive and are perceived by that context. It also explains how the different experiences that young people have will lead them to forge very different identities vis-a`-vis American society. Given something as basic as an elementary-, middle-, or secondary school history or English class curriculum content and its candid, thoughtful, and engaged delivery, this framing reveals that some young people will find a good fit between their experiences and the expectations of society, while others, particularly racial and ethnic minorities, will not see American societal values reflected in their experiences in positive ways. Given the latter instance, the absence suggests sources of risk, challenges, and heightened stress for some and, at the same time, for others introduces psychological protection as beliefs of privilege and unacknowledged supports and benefits; such parallel and non-overlapping experiences occur while all share the same space, cognitive processing of the social (learning) context, and internalize the same expectations for academic performance and civic engagement. For example, equality and justice might be seen as inherent American values, but they are not experienced in the same way by all Americans. The history of equality in the United States is such that some minority groups do not have the same experiences with or perceptions about equality as the white majority; that is, justice and fairness mean something very different to those who fear the justice system than it does to those who see it as a source of protection and support. Those who feel discouraged about voting or disenfranchised in politics will not have the same feelings about democracy as those who have more influence including visibility in the political system. There are unavoidable experiences of dissonance for those who have negative experiences with such American ideas and observations of self and others who attempt to live the espoused ideals (see Swanson & Spencer, in press). Young children's awareness of ''differences'' regarding social preferences begin early and become progressively more complex over time (e.g., see Spencer, 1984, 1985; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). In fact, ideally, all young Americans will develop a strong positive attachment to the democratic ideals that make up American identity, but for many, their experiences in society are in conflict with this optimistic message. Youths' observations in social life as well as the content of curriculum both modeled and provided are often in direct opposition to the message of equality and justice professed and have implications for schooling experiences and academic outcomes (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003; Swanson et al., 2003). Much worse, socializing agents at home, school, the media, business, and government are frequently uncomfortable with and, thus, reactively frequently pathologize and demonize youths' efforts to move invisible illustrations of societal inequality (e.g., a lack of adequate housing, health resources, schooling, work opportunities, and supports for adult transitioning efforts) to visible forms as messages about enduring conditions of social injustice.

LACK OF REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE ABOUT VARIATIONS IN EXPERIENCE

At the heart of this problem is the lack of dialogue in the United States about the different historical occurrences experienced by diverse groups as well as the untoward living conditions endured by young people in society. There is no national level dialogue about the variability of experience, and there is

sparse discussion in schools, with students, about the different experiences had by youth. The result is that young people have experiences in society that are not analyzed, explained, and made visible for general discussion and as learning opportunities; the oversight is particularly significant for K-12 educators as well as research scientists intending to design research studies of potential salience for policy, practice, and training (see Fisher et al., 2003). For AMERICAN IDENTITY: IMPACT ON YOUTHS' ATTACHMENT TO IDEALS 63 Downloaded By: [University of Chicago] At: 22:39 9 June 2011 example, we know that new immigrants do well, but the children of those first generation immigrants do not do as well as their parents (see Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2006). Unfortunately, there are too few discussions as to the reasons for the phenomenon. Young people easily observe that different people vary in the resources available for confronting normal developmental tasks, but socializing adults infrequently and candidly acknowledge and explain non-stereotyping reasons for such differences. Furthermore, as suggested, young people's developmentally linked views about society emanate from assumptions based upon personal characteristics such as skin color, dialects, ethnicity, immigration status, social class, and religion. Values, attitudes, and beliefs about group membership and attendant treatment are internalized with little in the way of guidance or direction from adults. Values and remedies to dissonance producing situations are too frequently solved by peers themselves with virtually little or no input from adults, who all too often, are uncomfortable with or feel helpless in their ability to provide candid responses or solutions.

A civics curriculum is taught in most schools in the United States, including U.S. history and the foundation of the U.S. political system. Most high school students are taught about ideas such as democracy, equality, justice, and freedom, and the role of these ideas in shaping America as a nation. Although most American youth are taught about these ideas, there is tremendous variety in how those ideas are transmitted by teachers, modeled by socializing agents, and, thus, internalized by youth. Societal differences experienced by young people based upon racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, national origin, and class differences lead to very different contexts for understanding and internalizing those ideas. The resulting variation in developmental contexts, and the diverse understandings of American ideals that take shape in those different contexts, leads to different American identities rather than the espoused goal: *a united American identity*.

Making those variations in experience even more powerful is the fact that they are not discussed candidly in U.S. classrooms. Young people are exposed to purported American ideas, but are not provided the opportunity to talk openly about how their own experiences diverge from the content of traditional curriculum materials. They are not invited to explore their own histories and make comparisons to what they read about in their history books, or to reflect upon those ideas in light of their own experiences had both in and out of school. In fact, too frequently, their existence is left to the realm of entertainment as topics better left to Hollywood. Research has found that teachers in certain school settings are unwilling to bring up the differential racial, ethnic, and class experiences of their students because teachers themselves are uncomfortable addressing those experiences in the classroom (Dell'Angelo, 2007; Hafiz, 2007). The children who most need guidance to understand how and why their experiences do not align with what they are learning in school, are the ones made invisible and, in general, not invited to address their own authentic experiences in the classroom.

That impact is further magnified by the adults who are charged with setting the developmental context for young people, yet these adults fail to establish a pathway for youth that includes reflection and dialogue about societal practices. We avoid talking about the ways that citizens are treated differently based on who they are or the histories that they represent, and, in doing so, we discourage self-reflection and candid social dialogue about the contemporary and historical concerns that shape our lives. And, especially in the case of adolescents, the lack of opportunity exacerbates a relationship of mistrust, which can undermine adult–youth relationships. This is a problem that goes beyond how it impacts the psychological development of individual young people in America. Avoiding self-reflection and the candid analysis of social differences has implications for broad societal issues, such as contemporary living conditions, educational opportunities, and the risks and supports that people will encounter in American society.

The lack of thoughtful and reflective dialogue in American society and in our schools does not mean that nothing is communicated about the American experience for different groups of people. Even though we, as adults, fail to bring young people's attention to the differences of experience, technology today makes it possible for young people to encounter those differences. They can (and do) observe on the Internet, in videos, and on T.V. that people have different experiences and occupy varying opportunity-linked spaces in society based upon the color of their skin, immigration status, gender, and their social class. Social injustice and differential treatment of racial minorities and the working poor in America are easily perceived by youth, with children as young as three years old also recognizing that people of different skin colors receive different treatment in society (Spencer, 1984, 1985, 2006, 2008b; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Spencer & MarkstromAdams, 1990). Yet, silence in schools about such injustices remains mainly because adults are uncomfortable discussing the fact, teacher-training programs inadequately prepare adults for the task, and social science and education research of salience is not translated into relevant training strategies. Young people talk to each other and use stereotypes to acknowledge differential long-term expectations for success or failure. This occurs without guidance from adults who have confronted these same differences but have learned to be silent and to maintain invisibility of the relevant issues. As a consequence, exclusive peer-on-peer consultation leads to inadequate coping responses, and the potential affirmation of the stereotypes created. Consequently, in turning to each other exclusively, there is a missed opportunity for cross-generational analyses of and explanations for the complex historical traditions of American life that leads to the noted different experiences including the continuation of an unacknowledged American democratic ideal fiction.

MISPERCEPTIONS OF VULNERABILITY AMONG DIVERSE AMERICAN YOUTH

Without candid dialogue, the ideas about American society that do get communicated are historical distortions. Ongoing fallacies about a just American society have resulted in a contemporary portrayal of certain people as vulnerable, usually based on visible features such as skin color, while everyone else is seen as normal. Through this distorted lens, people who are considered vulnerable are seen as having only risks, as lacking in resources, and as non-contributing members of society. The reality is that everyone is vulnerable; only the comic Superman is fiction. All humans are confronted both by diverse risks as well as supported by a variety of protective factors (Anthony, 1974, 1987; Bulhan, 1985; Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008b; Spencer et al., 2006). Those who are viewed as ''normal,'' in fact, actually

have disproportionately high levels of protective factors and supports, which may be linked to the disproportional distribution of resources spawned by socially structured conditions of inequality and social injustice. Thus, even the highly privileged share the status of human vulnerability even though the level and specific type of risk factors may be different (e.g., risk may be having an inadequate coping repertoire due to the fact that high privilege presence denies opportunities for practicing adaptive coping). A candid analysis of the under acknowledged dilemma of ignoring the downside of ill begotten privilege might be helpful for understanding contemporary greed and the unexpected suicide rates among those generally considered privileged as a function of race. When we view certain youth as ''vulnerable'' (i.e., meaning possessing only risks) and certain others as normal, in fact, we deny both groups their capacity to contribute to society. For those who are seen as narrowly vulnerable (i.e., the acknowledgment of their risks while overlooking their strengths and opportunities to build upon them), the consequent social stereotyping depicts them solely as drains on societal resources and, in fact, unable and incapable of making civic contributions. The troubling and broadly subscribed to stereotype makes youths' efforts to adaptively respond to developmental tasks (e.g., such as schooling and civic engagement) significantly more challenging. In response, youths' ''adaptive responses'' (which are viewed as maladaptive from decision makers) serve to set themselves at a societal distance. The patterned response implies that such youth view themselves as unwanted and not valued as American citizens, or that they are not contributing societal members even after protracted efforts to be accepted.

At the same time, however, those who are seen as privileged are often assumed to be highly resourced, and as suggested, research has shown that they also face risks in their development that limit their capacity as civic actors (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2002, 2005). Affluent youth in America are often not provided sufficient challenges to hone their capacities for making a contribution to society. There is a unique character of fearfulness that develops in these young people because they have significant expectations placed on them for being highly competent and self-aware, but have no experience in working hard for things, which is needed to develop competence and internalize adequate effectance motivation. In addition, from a phenomenological variant of ecological system perspective (PVEST: Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008b; Spencer et al., 2006), their inability to acknowledge American inequality reinforces their fearfulness and use of maladaptive coping strategies such as suicide, sexual promiscuity, vices, and others practices as suggested by Luthar and colleagues (e.g., Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2002, 2005).

The outcome of these historical distortions is that some people possess disproportionate privileges, which serve as risk factors, and others have protective factors as resources, which come from adaptive coping with significant adversity and, ultimately, are able to make a positive civic impact. However, and unfortunately too frequently, their protective factors are not viewed as such, and thus their resources are devalued while their risk factors are amplified(!). The American dilemma of historical distortions about American race relations and structurally determined injustices and inequality are not acknowledged as social truths to be confronted, analyzed, and corrected as social opportunities.

Although there are multiple illustrations of youthful resiliency (i.e., good outcomes obtained from high risk situations), the media depictions, opportunities made available through work options, innovative schooling design, and social programming ignore the fact of individual and group resilience. For the most

part, too many are treated as high in risks and low in resources. From an identity perspective, too few of these young people are taught to truly appreciate themselves and the unique strengths, capacities, and potential which they have as contributing members of society. Instead, stereotypes and a priori assumptions of pathology and deviancy, AMERICAN IDENTITY: IMPACT ON YOUTHS' ATTACHMENT TO IDEALS in addition to problematic assumptions, guide decisionmaking, teacher training, and the design of ''social supports.'' Without an acknowledgement of the American dilemma of structured social and economic inequality, distortions in the design of ''social supports'' result in citizens not experiencing or perceiving intended supports as, indeed, supportive. Further, from a policy analysis and evaluation perspective, the lack of a positive outcome of the assumed ''supportive intervention'' feeds into continuing stereotypes and beliefs that presume the squandering of resources. Importantly, this conclusion is assumed without questioning either the adequacy or appropriateness of the intervention advanced or the problematic undergirding assumptions made about need and sources of risk. Accordingly, the inability of Americans to acknowledge differences in patterns of treatment, experienced American histories, and the continuing lack of fairness in resource distribution and opportunity for all, in fact, undermines beliefs of fairness, misuses resources, and compromises the acquisition of a similarly meaningful American identity.

There are teacher training programs and organizations, which purport a desire to help young people, in particular those who are viewed as ''at risk.'' Like other civic efforts, these well-intentioned organizations provide opportunities and assistance for young people, but fail to take a critical first step. That is, generally missing from the curriculum of ''the helpers'' (i.e., as developing educators) are opportunities to know themselves. Unless such organizations step back and help their own trainees and budding professionals to know themselves and their historical contributions to the status quo, many efforts to aid our young people to understand themselves as learners and productive American citizens are vacuous efforts, at best.

Accordingly, providing such organizations with significant resources may help the specific organization and young professionals' beliefs about their own superiority and unacknowledged privilege; however, the potential is great for failing to assist the very young people whom they aim to help. To make the critical first step of actually helping young people to understand their concrete and under-supported situations (and themselves, as young professionals), the adults in these positions need to first understand themselves and their undergirding beliefs about their privilege and historical placement in society; these are not easy intrapsychic journeys. In preparing to help youth, it is critical that each young professional understands how risk factors operate for youth who have a lot of resources and privileges as well as those who appear to have little else except risk factors. Thus, acknowledging the high risk but also the high protective factor presence for many of America's many resilient young people as well as the adults in these communities actually provides a foundation to build upon (i.e., both in terms of individual development and between and within community level social relationships).

Rather than perpetuating this distorted picture of vulnerability and privilege, our goal should be to help young people to understand who they are, what their resources are, how historical forces have contributed to their lives, and what they can offer society as agents of change, promoters of social justice, and salient sources of diverse strengths. Privileged young people need to see themselves as

having unique competencies that can contribute in meaningful ways to the establishment of a fair and just community. They need guidance and opportunities to develop an identity of social, participatory, and contributory competence. The socialization suggested includes their exposure to and discourse about the historical fact of social inequality and contemporary illustrations of continuing discrimination, economic inequality, and social injustice. Underresourced young people also need help to see their own multiple cultural, psychological, and social resources, and to see that they are significant contributors to civil society. Our research shows that youth from low resource communities do contribute in significant ways, often by supporting their adult family members; however, the work also indicates that the ways in which they contribute to their families and communities are not consistently acknowledged and viewed by society as civic contributions (Spencer, Noll, & Cassidy, 2005). However, through their support, their efforts frequently serve their family's ability to maximize the family economy, contribute to society and, thus, should be viewed as making civic-minded contributions. Too frequently, only particular types of community contributions are considered civic minded activities and tasks.

All youth, regardless of their social circumstances, need help to develop an identity of social resourcefulness and sense of self as an important civic actor. One does become more attached to country if that country sees the individual not just as a resource taker, but also as a resource provider. Young people are meaning makers, and through their experiences in society, each seeks to make meaning in their lives. As a result, those experiences had will cause youth either to become attached to modeled American ideals and build strong American identity, or to distance themselves from those self- or group-disparaging stereotypic ideas (too frequently aspects of American discriminatory conditions) and, thus, their potentially embraced identity as American citizens. This distancing will look like detachment, but it is really disenfranchisement—a legitimate sense among some groups of young people that they are not part of American society because, at best, American society does not view them as resourceful and contributing.

Importantly, this distancing and proactive coping is supported by the observation that, at the same time, the invisibility of social injustice issues affirms the nation's apparent lack of interest in 1) reflecting on its oppressive past with reference to marginalized groups, 2) acknowledging current patterns of discrimination and inequality, and 3) demonstrating legitimate interests in authentic change. These are the lessons about fairness and justice, which youth are learning. The perspective promulgated in this paper does not require that everyone has the same experience in society, but rather recognizes that everyone, if provided the same opportunities and situations of fairness and justice, will still utilize unique pathways. Everyone can develop as a civic actor and can develop attachment to country, by experiencing and believing in the reciprocal opportunities and obligations between the nation and themselves as valued and fairly treated citizens. This experientially based civic identity includes knowing themselves and experiencing citizenship as a function of inferred beliefs concerning their value to the nation and unbiased insights about what it is that they have to contribute.

Adults—teachers, parents, leaders—need to acknowledge the different pathways that young people are on and help them recognize what they need to do in light of those differences to develop identity as competent and valued civic participants. However, the process begins with adults who are unafraid to confront themselves, their histories, and each person's individual and collective contribution to the

nation's status quo. As the adults who set the context for youth development, it is critical that we initiate specific dialogue with young people that will help them to know themselves. Before we can do that, as suggested, we first need to confront our own experiences in American society, and the distortions in how we understand American history. It is critical to learn how to reflect on those experiences ourselves, so that we can then be capable of engaging young people in thoughtful and honest dialogue. We need to know ourselves and to confront our history as a nation before we can engage young people in self-reflection so that they, too, can know themselves in candid and authentic ways. The next section proposes ideas for initiating that dialogue of self-reflection and self-knowledge.

STRATEGIZING FOR POSITIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY FORMATION

There are strategies that we can introduce for providing and modeling an image of American identity for young people; most critical is that such strategies begin with adults in America looking at ourselves, as a first step. If we want all young Americans to achieve a positive and constructive national identity, it is imperative to acknowledge that the history we are conveying contains significant distortions. It is important to acknowledge that diverse citizens continue to have quite varied lived experiences amid those social distortions. It is critical that we are candid about the idealized vision of America that we want young people to attach by acknowledging that, in fact, it bears no relation to what they actually see and live on a daily basis. Rather than viewing some people as highly vulnerable (i.e., risks only without acknowledging protective factors and strengths) and others as ''normal,'' we must begin to acknowledge that all people, as a function of our shared humanity, possess some resources and are burdened by particular risks. It is necessary that we talk about young people in ways that recognize the disproportionate injustices carried by some and greater opportunities afforded others. The socially structured high risk conditions need to be associated with the widely advertised disparities in outcomes and attendant social circumstances requiring significant and immediate societal level change. Accordingly, it is critical that we both acknowledge their efforts when we see young people contributing to civil society and commit as models to improve the probability of the continuation of same. In other words, as an informal reconciliation effort, it is critical to re-visit the history of current conditions of persistent inequality and social injustice and actively model efforts for affecting change. Saying the words is not the same as enacting the necessary behaviors. In fostering positive American identity among young people, it is necessary that we revise our view of those who are highly vulnerable and work toward modeling a democratic identity for them as well as see them as able to shape their own capacity to participate in a democratic society.

Young people know that the ''official histories'' taught in school, modeled in society, and communicated in the media, are distorted, at best. Thus, there continues to be a dire need for authenticity and truth-telling if we are to have adult credibility and the nationally accepted American identity sought. We present an idealized American story and hope for youth to take that up as their story; however, young people know that the idealized stories do not align with their experiences and observations. Our youth are young ... not stupid. They are aware that different groups of people receive different treatment. This means that we, as adults, need to be aware of and authentic with ourselves about the different experiences and opportunities had by people living side-by-side in the United States as American citizens. In strategizing to develop young people who are more attached to their country, we need to

undo our own distorted images of an idealized America. This includes proactively living and making opportunities available such that we can move from building an image of America to living a reality of equal opportunity, fairness, and social justice. Personal authenticity depends upon not merely communicating an image and telling the truth but will depend on living those truths. The process described should support our achieving a new image of America and attendant practices, which both expresses the values that we want to uphold as Americans and aligns with the experiences that Americans are having in real time.

Since there are multiple paths to a sustainable and positive American identity, it is important to think about how to provide environments that support those multiple pathways. Very often the needs of youth who are low in resources but also have few risk factors, who I call our "Columbine kids," are ignored. At the same time, the needs of those who are high in risks and high in resources (i.e., youths showing resiliency), are similarly ignored. As a result, each receives inadequate acknowledgment and support to move onto their unique paths toward a positive and proactive American identity. At the same time, there are young Americans who are low in resources and high in risk factors; their high vulnerability means they have different needs for developing an attachment to their country. Adult leaders who work with youth are responsible for recognizing that there are different pathways, and therefore different strategies are needed to support them. Recognizing diverse experiences, structured inequalities, and divergent pathways requires very special training of socializing agents to guarantee that we are building on a durable foundation for all young people. As noted, some youth are high risk and low in resources, and require a lot more of an investment, so strategizing for different pathways is a more efficient and more effective use of society's resources. If we want all youth to develop the same positive attachment to American ideals and the sense that they are contributing members of a democratic society, then, we need to support their development. This includes having insights with awareness of how all young people come to be on their unique path and an honest appraisal of society's contribution to same and attendant unique supports required for each trajectory.

To obtain a renewed American identity, it is imperative that we as adult socializers confront our own past. To do this, we need forums for dialogue that will allow us to address challenging issues in a civil, honest, and open manner. Specifically, we need to establish a forum concept for homogeneous, guided, and proactive "fireside chats" to be convened across the nation. These discourse opportunities should be organized to encourage candid and honest discussions about our history as a nation, which also allow for face-saving (i.e., until we can face "our person" in the mirror). To do that, at least initially, I suggest that these discussions take place in groups organized by gender, (self identified) race=ethnicity, immigration status, and social class. Without these candid, segregated or silo-like conversations, it will be impossible to embrace our various American "others," and to live the American identity ideal that we want for our children. The idea is implied in traditional Eriksonian theorizing, which suggests that an individual cannot embrace one's opposite until well-acquainted and comfortable with the self (i.e., a facing-up of one's good, bad, and ugly aspects of the self, including the group's collective history).

Suggested here is that it is not possible to reinvigorate a collective American identity unless and until we confront the self, both individually and collectively as a nation. Thus, we cannot provide the American identity ideal for our children, as a context for their development, until we confront our history in

forging a true democratic, genuinely pluralistic, and collectivist valuing nation. The first necessary step is confronting ourselves and challenging the distorted portrayal of American history. Participating in the type of open and homogenous dialogues described, perhaps, is the first step in confronting our distorted history, irrational fears, under-acknowledged anger, and sustaining sense of hope. Our young people will find it difficult to develop the valued attachment to American ideals, unless they can see and live those ideals in their own lives. If three-year-olds are as clear about the biases that are experienced in this country as the research has shown, then as they move into adolescence, they will do so knowing that America is not a just country for everyone (refer to Spencer, 1984, 1985; Spencer & Dorbusch, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Without innovative educational discourse opportunities, which begin with ourselves, we continue to have little credibility in the eyes of our youth.

Renewal or the formation of American identity in our young people must begin with us, as the adults who set the developmental context. Engaging in innovative and candid counter-narrative discussions about justice, fairness, and equality in America is a necessary part of the process. This open dialogue is not happening in America right now, and therefore there is no shared experience with these ideals, no shared American identity to attach to for producing an authentic bond. Maya Angelou captured these sentiments in her quote: ''Strictly speaking, one cannot legislate love, but what one can do is legislate justice and fairness... . Legislation affords us the chance to see if we might love each other'' (quoted in Lanker, 1989). Engaging in opportunities to honestly and openly revisit our historical and contemporary experiences with America's structured inequality and injustice moves us forward in obtaining an authentic American identity for ourselves and for our young people. The suggested strategy creates the possibility of a true lived democracy.

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