

Values over structure: An ethnographic study of volunteers participating in a juvenile diversion program



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Abstract

This study is an ethnographic study of community volunteers participating in a juvenile diversion program called Neighborhood Accountability Boards (NAB). My research shows that NAB members encourage offending youths to make better choices in the future. Specifically, NAB members encourage youths to obey the law, work hard, and have a good attitude. However, the NAB members are aware of environmental factors, such as family and schools, which may limit the choices actually available to youths and influence their decision making. Ultimately, these findings represent a contradiction in which NAB members encourage youths to subscribe to middle-class values despite the fact that there may be structural obstacles which impede youths from doing so.

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Introduction

This paper examines Neighborhood Accountability Boards (NAB) as an example of community reparative boards. The community reparative board model, victims, offenders, family members, and community volunteers come together to discuss the harm the offense has caused and develop restorative sanctions with the goals of repairing the harms caused by the offense and returning the offender to good standing in the community. Generally, all parties are involved in the development of the case plan, or contract. Thus, community stakeholders rather than professional “strangers” make decisions, as is typical in the traditional judicial system.

More specifically, this paper focuses on the community members who volunteer on NABs in a metropolitan county in Florida. I have observed a total of 19 cases at three NABs in varying community types: urban, suburban, and rural, throughout the county. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven NAB volunteers about their participation in the program with the hope of better understanding the ways in which community members participate in restorative justice programs, their attitudes about crime, and their feelings about their participation. The following analyses center on questions of what volunteers do during NAB hearings, how they communicate with the offenders they serve, and how understand the relationship between agency and social structure.

Generally, I have found that NAB members attempt to persuade the youths participating in to obey the law, work hard, and get a good education. Furthermore, NAB members emphasize that through these values youths participating in the program will be able to reach the American Dream. Although NAB members spend significant energy convincing youths to subscribe to values often associated with the white middle class, they fail to address structural barriers such as poverty and family structure that may prevent some program participants from fully attaining the American Dream. Interestingly however, during one-on-one interviews, NAB members often confessed that due to environmental factors such as their family-structure and home life, some youths participating in the program may not be able to achieve the happy, successful lives associated with the American Dream.

Herein lays a contradiction. One on hand NAB volunteers promise all youths participating in the program success if only one works hard and follows the rules. Yet on the other hand, the readily acknowledge that some youth will not be successful. I argue that failing to address perceived structural barriers with youths participating in the NAB program may be more harmful than helpful. I acknowledge that encouraging youths to subscribe to white middle-class values may meet the program goals of repairing the harms of the offense, returning the offender to good standing in the community, and preventing recidivism. However, in some

cases, failing to address confront the structural or environmental barriers which some offenders face, may alienate some youth from the program, thus undermining NAB's restorative goals.

Literature Review

Community volunteers have long been associated with the justice system. Goddard and Jacobson (1967), directors of Lane County Juvenile Court Services in Eugene, Oregon, discussed the benefits of community participation in the justice system. They explain that volunteers have roots in the community which may provide resources for the programs and the youth they serve. Additionally, Goddard and Jacobson explain that volunteers offer a different perspective than professional staff. They write (1967, p. 340) that in many cases "volunteers who have actually experienced the same situations as clients may have first-hand familiarity with their folkways, values and languages."

In order to obtain a better understanding of the community members who volunteer in criminal justice programs and their motivations for volunteering, Souza and Dhimi (2009) surveyed 76 volunteers from twelve community-based restorative justice programs in British Columbia, Canada. They found that the majority of volunteers participating in the restorative justice programs were White women in their 50s, and that most had a college education. Additionally, volunteers in their study reported being dissatisfied with the traditional justice system and its inability to rehabilitate offenders, which Souza and Dhimi suggest may be what leads them to volunteering in restorative justice programs.

Evaluations of Restorative Justice Programs

Community-based restorative justice programs may be influential in reducing recidivism, or reoffending, among juvenile offenders (Bergseth & Bouffard 2007, McGarell & Hipple 2007). Rodriguez (2007) found that youth participating in the program were less likely to recidivate than youth who participated in the traditional juvenile court system. Rodriguez found some gender difference and reports that boys were slightly more likely to recidivate than girls. Race however had no significant effects on recidivism (Rodriguez 2007). Bergseth and Bouffard (2007) provide additional support suggesting that youth participating in restorative justice programs are less likely to recidivate than those participating in traditional juvenile court programs. More relevant to the present study, McGarell and Hipple (2007) examined the effects of family-group conferencing compared to other forms of

community-based diversion programs. Findings from their study indicate that youth who participated in family group conferences had longer time periods between their initial and subsequent arrests (McGarell & Hipple 2007:233). In sum, existing research indicates that community-based programs are more effective in reducing recidivism than traditional programming.

Although some restorative justice programs appear to reduce recidivism, we do not fully understand how they work. The work of community volunteers is central to the success of community-based restorative justice efforts. In spite of this, little research has specifically examined the roles of volunteers in such programs. Aside from a series of studies published by David R. Karp and his colleagues (Cheshire & Karp 2007, Karp et al 2004, Karp & Drakulich 2004, Karp 2001), there is little understanding of the roles and values of community volunteers.

Karp's publications focus on reparative probation boards in Vermont. The Vermont reparative probation program is for first time offending adults and is based on restorative principles. In his research Karp employed a variety of research methods, including surveys (Karp et al. 2004, Karp & Drakulich 2004, Cheshire & Karp 2001), content analysis of video-taped hearings (Karp 2001), and content analysis of case files (Karp & Drakulich 2004).

Karp (2001) reported that overall, community volunteers are able to research restorative outcomes and explained that community volunteers are able to develop contracts with program participants which focus on repairing the harms of the offense. Thus, it appears that community members are capable of reaching program goals.

Focusing on the types of people who volunteer, Karp et al. (2004) found that overall, volunteers tended to be demographically different than the offender population - volunteers differed from offenders in all categories except for race. For instance, volunteers in Karp's studies tended to be of higher socio-economic status than the offenders they served (Karp et al., 2004). Reparative board volunteers also tended to be somewhat older than the adult offender population (Karp et al., 2004).

In regards to volunteer attitudes, Cheshire and Karp (2007) found that long-term volunteers were less likely to hold retributive attitudes towards. They also found a positive relationship between conservative political ideologies and retributive attitudes toward offenders (Cheshire & Karp, 2007). Additionally, volunteers with conservative political affiliations were strongly associated with beliefs that offenders were "not better off" after participating in the program (Cheshire & Karp, 2007, p. 87). And yet they also found that volunteers reporting greater religiosity or spirituality were more likely to believe that offenders were "better off" after

participating in the program. These findings seem to contradict themselves as conservative political attitudes and religiosity are often associated with each other, however, the study did not differentiate between “conservative” and “liberal” religious denominations. Politically conservative attitudes were also negatively associated with variables measuring the belief that communities benefitted from commitment to restorative justice principles (Cheshire & Karp, 2007). These and other findings are most useful to my present research. Because my project explores the ways in which volunteers talk about choices and decision-making, it is important to understand how political ideology and spirituality may influence their attitudes and values.

Middle-Class Values, the American Dream, and the Justice System

Hard work, an education, a good attitude, and obeying the law are important cultural values in our society. In fact, Albert Cohen (1955) argues that children in US society are judged by what he calls the “middle-class measuring rod.” According to Cohen, this measuring rod consists of nine principles: 1) ambition is a virtue, 2) the ethic of individual responsibility, 3) achievement and success at work and in the classroom, 4) the willingness to postpone immediate gratification for future gain, 5) long-ranging planning and budgeting, 6) exercising courtesy and self-control 7) controlling violence and aggression, 8) constructive leisure time, and 9) respect for other’s and their property (Cohen, 1955; Shoemaker 2010).

Although Cohen’s theory is dated, more recent research has echoed his position. Ann Ferguson (2001) found a similar pattern in her study of an inner city elementary school. In her study, Ferguson found that school personnel frequently punished “unruly” Black male students whom they believed did not subscribe to middle-class values. Additionally, Laub and Sampson (2003) argue that lower and working class delinquent boys who adopt middle-class values significantly reduce their recidivism. Specifically, they argue that over the life course, lower-class men who obtain an education, hold a steady job and establish strong personal relationships are less likely to commit new crimes than their counterparts who do not. While these studies do not directly cite Cohen’s theory, they appear to reflect his position that the omnipresence of middle-class values and the impact they have on individuals’ lives. In summary, although community volunteers have long been associated with the criminal justice system, relatively little research has explored who volunteers and how they’re beliefs and attitudes effect the programs they participate in. Although Karp and his colleagues have begun to explore the contributions volunteers bring to restorative justice programs, there is still much to learn. This study contributes to the understanding of restorative justice programs.

Methods & Data

The present study identifies gaps in our understanding of the people who volunteer in community-based restorative justice programs. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the values that NAB members communicate to juvenile offenders during hearings. To accomplish this goal, this study employs the ethnographic methods of observation and interviewing. The following sections provide a description of the research settings and the strategies used to collect and analyze the data.

Setting

Between February and November, 2009, I conducted four field visits at three research sites, which I call Bay View, Cypress Terrace, and Plantation Oaks (described in Table 1), for a total of twelve visits. At the time there were eleven NABs in operation throughout the county. It would have been impossible to conduct observations at each group. Therefore, I wanted to assemble the most diverse sample of boards and participants as possible. I selected three NABs from different community types (urban, suburban, and rural) for the sample.

Table 1 Research Sites

NAB	Community Type	Volunteers	Meeting Location
Bay View	Rural	2-4 Volunteers each month. Mostly White, one Latina woman. Ages range from 40-70.	Multipurpose room in the Bay View County Service Center.
Cypress Terrace	Urban	4-5 volunteers each month. Mostly Black women, one Black man. Ages range from 40-80 years old.	Multipurpose room in the Cypress Terrace Community Center

Plantation Oaks	Suburban	10-12 Volunteers each month. Mostly White business owners. Mixed between men and women. Ages range from 30-65.	Board room of the Plantation Oaks Chamber of Commerce
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Methods

During my field visits, I observed NAB hearings and I also engaged in informal conversations with NAB volunteers and case managers. While observing NAB hearings, I generally sat out of the way; in the back of the room or at the far end of the conference table. I took detailed jottings, including as much information as possible about the conversations and interactions that occurred between volunteers, offenders, victims, and family members (Emerson et al., 1996). The notes were later typed up in the form of field notes. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms to refer to all study participants and locations.

I observed two or three cases per field visit, although this varied somewhat between sites. Altogether, I observed a total of 19 cases; some of these cases were observed multiple times. The cases observed were racially diverse, five cases involved White youths, six involved Latino youths, and eight involved Black youths. The juveniles in the cases were mostly those of males, with the sample including only eight cases with females.

I observed a variety of cases including: petit theft, assault or battery, drug possession, and criminal mischief. A total of seven youths completed the NAB program during my observation, whereas only two failed. The remaining ten cases were extended, or continued, beyond my time in the field so the outcome of these cases is unknown. Due to IRB regulations, I was unable to observe youth under the age of 12. Unfortunately because of this rule, I was unable to enroll several youths into my study, especially at the Plantation Oaks NAB site. The teens present during my observations were between 14 and 17 years old.

To fully understand NAB member's perceptions of the program and the youth who participate in NAB, I also conducted formal in-depth interviews with seven of NAB volunteers. The interview sample was derived from NAB volunteers at the three sites I visited among those who expressed interest in being interviewed. I conducted four interviews with volunteers from the Plantation Oaks group, two with volunteers from Bay View, and one volunteer from Cypress Terrace. Interviews

ranged in length from just under 30 minutes to just over an hour. All interviews were digitally recorded and have been fully.

Analytical Strategy

The data were analyzed using methods consistent with the grounded theory approach. Analysis began with initial readings of printed copies of field notes and interviews. During these first readings I employed open coding to develop a list of initial codes. After several rounds of readings and line-by line, or open coding, several major themes began to emerge from within the data. These themes were further developed using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and through memo writing (Charmaz, 2001).

Findings

Choices and Consequences: Emphasizing Agency through White Middle Class Values

Early in my observations, it became apparent that NAB members spent a considerable amount of time discussing the importance of obeying the law, working hard, and having a good attitude. To NAB members, these represent important skills or qualities which are necessary for individuals to lead successful and productive lives. Ultimately, through NAB members something about the American Dream.

Obeying the Law

Perhaps the most important choice youths have, as emphasized by NAB members, is obeying the law. After all, youth are referred to the program for a law violation. Although not formally charged, the youth in the program are considered "criminals." Additionally, a new arrest constitutes a violation of the program and may result in the case being returned to the State Attorney's Office. NAB members encourage youth, and in some cases their family members, to follow the law and to avoid future fighting, stealing, and drug use. In so doing, NAB members convey messages that encourage law abiding and discourage law breaking. Typically, law abiding messages are conveyed by giving youth alternatives to anti-social or illegal behaviors. Additionally, NAB members use "cautionary tales" of incarceration, or other unpleasant outcomes, in an attempt to discourage anti-social or illegal behaviors.

The first example of a NAB member emphasizing individual agency and alternatives to law breaking comes from an exchange between Gloria, a middle age Latina NAB volunteer at Bay View, Nora, the NAB case manager, and Jeff, a 14-year-old White teen who was referred to NAB for battery. Often, NAB members will ask a child what they would do if they were in a situation similar to the one which led to their arrest. In this instance, Gloria and Nora respond to Jeff's prediction that if he were in a similar situation again, he might fight again.

Gloria: What would happen next time? Would you get into a fight again?

Jeff: I don't know, maybe [pauses] if they hit me. Yeah, probably.

Gloria: You will get suspended again. You know I have a boy too, and I tell him don't hit back.

Nora: I used to work with girls in jail and, you know, sometimes they would get aggressive but I couldn't hit them back. We could only redirect or restrain them, but couldn't fight. You're an athletic looking guy; you could probably get away if someone tried to fight you.

Gloria's comment suggests that there are undesirable consequences for continued fighting: Jeff will get suspended again. Building on Gloria's statement, Nora emphasizes Jeff's agency in deciding whether or not to fight. Nora borrows from her experience as a juvenile probation officer to explain to Jeff that he can choose to avoid fighting. In this situation Nora encourages Jeff to think of alternatives to fighting. Her statement emphasizes that he has the ability to avoid troubling situations. In this quote, the message is clear: Jeff can choose whether or not to fight. Although Nora's comments emphasize Jeff's agency, they do not explain consequences for making the wrong choice. However, combined with Gloria's previous statement, the message to Jeff is clear: if you choose to fight again, you will get in trouble.

In another case, Gloria, the same volunteer, asked Ashley, a 15-year-old White teen referred to NAB for shoplifting, what she would do in a similar situation. Ashley's response was much different from Jeff's:

Gloria: What have you learned?

Ashley: I've learned that stealing is bad and you shouldn't steal.

Gloria: What if you are with your friends and something like this happens again?

Ashley: I'll go tell someone that works there. I don't want to be involved.

Gloria: That's great! I'm glad to hear that you've learned your lesson. You need to make your own decisions – go your own way.

In this example, Ashley tells Gloria and the other NAB members that she has learned that stealing is wrong, and she implicitly acknowledges the negative consequences of stealing. Gloria praises Ashley's response and explains that she needs to "make her own decisions" and "go her own way." Much like in the example with Jeff, Gloria's comments to Ashley emphasize her ability to make her own choices. As Nora explained to Jeff that he can choose to avoid fighting and possibly escape from an attack, Gloria encourages Ashley that she does not have to shoplift just because her friends do.

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of encouraging youth to make good choices and obey the law also came from the Bay View NAB. Jasmine, a Black 16-year-old, was referred to NAB on charges of criminal mischief. As retold by Jasmine and her mother during her hearing, after several incidents in which her younger brother was bullied at school, Jasmine's mother instructed her to take a bat and "go down there [to the school] and bust out their windows and bust their heads". When Jasmine arrived at the school, the boys who had bullied her brother were in the gym, so she did not confront them. Instead, she smashed one of the boy's car windows. In the following quote, Nora, the case manager, explains to a Jasmine and her mother that they cannot take the law into their own hands:

From now on you have to turn things around. If you see a wrong, instead of handling it yourself and causing trouble, turn it around so that the other people get in trouble. It's a cultural thing, I know. People in my culture [referencing her Cuban heritage] don't like to call the police either. But we live in a different culture, even if we were raised different. In the system we're in, you can't take the law into your own hands.

In this excerpt, Nora emphasizes that although some individuals do not like to get the police involved, there is no alternative. The message to Jasmine and her mother is clear: "you can't take the law into your own hands," and doing so will only lead to more trouble.

In the previous examples, NAB members emphasized agency, or the ability of youths to make their own decisions. In the cases of Jeff and Jasmine, NAB members also explained that there are consequences for making the wrong choices. These accounts of potential consequences represent "cautionary tales" which provide implicit and explicit examples of unpleasant consequences for those who break the law. These cautionary tales emphasize that one is responsible and will be held accountable for one's actions.

Through cautionary tales, NAB members generally emphasized that continued run-ins with the law will lead to bigger problems in the end. As Randy, a volunteer from Plantation Oaks, once asked during an initial hearing, “how do you look in orange?” In another example, David, a White volunteer from the Plantation Oaks NAB, cautions Dominique, a 17-year-old Black teen not to steal again, explaining: “this is a one-time program. You can’t keep stealing. Next time you’re toast.” In another case, David explains to Antonio, a 14 year-old Latino boy, also referred to Plantation Oaks for theft, “[the offense] may seem minor to you. But it leads to bigger things...this program is to stop you from being a statistic.” These accounts allude to the fact that there are more consequences for criminal behavior than being referred to NAB. David for instance, implies that repeat offenses will lead the youth through the court system and into the jail house. While each of these examples focuses on formal consequences of crime, some of the most vivid examples of cautionary tales that I observed focused on informal consequences of criminal behavior.

One such example comes from Cypress Terrace. Rosetta is a Black woman volunteering in Cypress Terrace. She addresses James, a 16 year-old Black male who will end up failing the program for continued drug use: “I’ll tell you from my own experience – I didn’t use but I was with someone who did. He started out just like you, started with marijuana. It makes me really sad, I don’t want to see you on the corner too; you have to make a choice.” In this example Rosetta uses a personal account of a former partner’s life to explain that continued drug use will lead to an undesirable future. As Rosetta points out, James can choose to quit using drugs now or end up living his life “on the corner.” In this narrative, James is shown that although marijuana use may seem harmless or fun now, there may be long-term consequences for continued use. Rather than telling James that he will end up in a jail cell, Rosetta’s example emphasizes an extreme but informal consequence, spending the rest of his life “on the corner” buying and selling drugs.

Working Hard

Aside from encouraging teens to obey the law, NAB members often emphasize the importance of hard work and education. In my observations, NAB members often gave examples from their lives about the importance of hard work. Most often the examples are of people who have gone to school, worked hard, and are now successful. Through their examples, NAB members reinforce the meritocratic ideal of the “American Dream”, emphasizing that those who work hard in school and in their careers are rewarded with material goods and high social status.

The following is an example from my field notes taken at the Plantation Oaks NAB. Dominique is a Black 17 year-old referred to NAB for a theft charge. She is in her junior year of high school. She recently returned to a traditional high school after spending a year in an alternative school to make up academic credits. Dominique wants to attend the Georgia Institute of Technology to become a veterinarian, however, her current grades are low. David and Randy, two White volunteers, attempt to motivate Dominique to improve her grades by giving examples from their own lives.

David: What's your GPA?

Dominique: 2.7.

David: 2.7? How do you expect to get into Georgia Tech with a GPA like that? You know, college admissions are very competitive – they want the best of the best. I'll tell you, last year I attended a graduation. There were kids with 7.8 GPAs. That's just crazy! How will you compete with that?

Randy: David is right, it's hard to get in, and even harder to get financial aid. I have a son. He plays football for his school. It costs \$30,000 a year to go there. Do you know how much I pay? Nothing. He's got scholarships for academics as well as for football. He got \$13,000 just for his grades alone. You're going to have to work harder.

Through their stories, David and Randy demonstrate to Dominique that it is important make good grades in school. David's story emphasizes the competitive nature of college admissions whereas Randy takes the story one step further explaining how good grades will bring much needed financial aid. Together these accounts emphasize that Dominique must work harder in high school if she wants to achieve her goal of attending Georgia Tech.

In another example from Bay View NAB, Sally, a retired school teacher, and Nora also try to motivate Jose, a 17-year-old Latino, referred for possession of marijuana, to stay in school. The following quotes are excerpts from my field notes. The first note shows Sally explaining that without an education, Jose will be limited in the work he can do. In the second note, Nora discusses her brother as an example of someone who has finished his education and has a comfortable life:

Sally: As an educator, school is important to me. Without an education you won't be able to do anything. Without an education you'll be out in the fields picking tomatoes, and oranges, and strawberries. Maybe you need to go to a career center. You need to talk to your parents and figure out what is best for you...

Moments later Nora adds the following:

Nora: You know, my brother went to tech school, now he's an electrician. That was 22 years ago. He wasn't always into school, when he was about your age. Though I had a talk with him to see what he wanted to do. He wanted to be a mechanic, so I set him up to work over the summer with a friend of mine. He worked a few weeks and said it was too hot working in the shop; he didn't want to be a mechanic anymore. But, anyway, he went to tech school and now he's an electrician. He makes a good living and has a nice house.

While Sally's and Nora's examples are different, they both emphasize the importance of education to Jose's future. Whereas Nora's story about her brother relates a positive outcome for someone who completed his education, Sally's predictions offer a darker outcome for Jose if he does not complete his education. Sally's tale is contextualized within the Bay View community. Her statement that "without an education you'll be out in the fields," reflects the agricultural industry which is supported largely by migrant Latino laborers in the Bay View area. Ultimately, Sally's message to Jose is that without an education, his career choices will be limited and thus his future will be unhappy.

In communicating the value of working hard, NAB members use examples from their own lives of individuals who have worked hard, finished school, and are now successful. Additionally, they caution youth that without an education they will be limited to low status jobs; they will be "picking fruit" or "flipping burgers." In this they create a dichotomous choice for the youth. They can choose to work hard and be successful, or they can drop out or do poorly in school and live a hard life. In many ways, their emphasis on hard work ties back to the meritocratic notions of the American Dream, or the idea that if one works hard and does the right thing, he or she will be successful.

Having a Good Attitude

Going beyond the importance of hard work, NAB members also consider attitude to be important. In many instances, hard work and good attitudes are inseparable. As James, a volunteer from Plantation Oaks explained during an interview: "Attitude is huge. Um, just you know, you can pretty much tell a kid's demeanor in the first few seconds of them coming into the room. [Pause] You pretty much know what kind of case, [pause] you know how this is gonna go." From James' statement it's clear that NAB members rely on their perceptions of attitudes presented by kids during hearings. From these perceptions, NAB members make judgments as to how to

handle the case. As I will show, teens who are perceived by NAB members to have a “bad attitude” are sometimes confronted. NAB members do not rely solely on their perceptions of attitudes. In the same ways that volunteers rely on school progress reports to measure academic improvement, NAB members rely on accounts from parents and family members to determine whether or not youth have good attitudes. Such accounts give NAB members a glimpse of the youth’s behavior and attitude at home. Through these accounts from parents and family members, board members also determine whether or not the youth is improving. Positive accounts are usually greeted with praise, while accounts of disrespect or not following parents rules result in confrontations from board members.

A strong example of parents’ accounts influencing NAB members’ opinions took place during a rehearing at Bay View. Larry, the father of Cole, a White teen charged with theft, offers several accounts of his son’s improvement. In the following example, Larry explains how he believes participating in NAB and counseling has helped his son:

It’s a great turn around for one month. He listens to me now [and] doesn’t argue. I told him we needed to make a folder for his paper work – usually he would yell and scream about; he didn’t say anything, [he] just went and got a folder.

Not only does Larry attest to his son’s improvement, but he also provides a specific example of how Cole’s attitude and behavior has changed. The Bay View volunteers were very pleased with the positive accounts which Larry provided. After the rehearing the volunteers talked among themselves about how great it was to hear of Cole’s improvement. Apparently, one of them had considered him a “lost cause” the previous month. Larry’s accounts helped her to change her opinion of Cole.

This however, is not always the case. Dominique is a 17-year-old Black teen who had been referred to the Plantation Oaks NAB for a theft charge. At the beginning of her daughter’s initial hearing, Raquel explained that Dominique was sent to an alternative school because “she didn’t want to listen or do her work, that’s why they sent her to the academy. Her last school didn’t want her there no more.” This characterizes Dominique as a lazy and disobedient child. Later, while Dominique was recounting the story of her arrest for shoplifting, Raquel added, “she was supposed to be at home babysitting. I told her no one was supposed to leave the house.” Moments later, Raquel explains that Dominique is lazy around the house, “she don’t want to work. I have to tell her over and over.” Raquel also adds that Dominique often argues with her younger siblings. Although it is not uncommon for a teenager to ignore their parent’s rules, these accounts construct Dominique as an unruly teen with a bad attitude. Later, during her initial hearing and subsequent

rehearings, NAB members often accused Dominique of having a “bad attitude”. One instance was from Randy, a White male volunteer at Plantation Oaks NAB:

For the last few minutes David has been trying to get Dominique to give details about her shoplifting offense. Dominique however has been indirect in her answers; in some ways she seems nervous. She stutters and speaks in a quiet voice while sitting with her arms crossed.

Randy interrupts: I don't see you getting anywhere with her. All I've seen from you is disrespect. Your arms are crossed, you don't care. Mr. David is asking you simple questions and you don't know the answers - this is crazy. Do you want to be here?

Dominique [beginning to cry]: Yes

Randy: I like to hear “Yes, sir” or “No, sir”; Are you understanding what Mr. David is trying to do?

At this point Dominique seems confused, disconnected, and overwhelmed. She sits quietly, sobbing.

Randy: He's trying to get you to open your eyes!

Again, David asks Dominique to explain what happened – still crying, she explains the event to the board members.

In this instance, Randy judged and confronted Dominique on what he interpreted as a “bad attitude”. In this case, Dominique’s tone, posture, and reluctance to answer questions was interpreted as disrespectful rather than nervous or even frightened. Randy’s perception of Dominique’s attitude may have been influenced by Dominique’s mother Raquel.

In the case of Dominique, it seems as though her mother’s characterizations reinforced the board members’ perception of Dominique’s attitude. Board members criticized Dominique for not following her mother’s rules and for not working hard enough at school. This case demonstrates the importance of a youth’s attitude during NAB hearings. Youths who are perceived to have good attitudes, or at least improving attitudes, are praised whereas youths who are perceived to have bad attitudes are at times chided. In many ways, hard work and good attitudes go hand in hand. Youths who work hard are often perceived to also have good attitudes. But hard work and a good attitude is not all that NAB members expect from youth participating in the program. As seen in the beginning of this section, they also expect that youth will stay out of trouble and obey the law.

Throughout this section, we have seen examples of NAB members comparing teens to the middle-class measuring rod. While hard work and an education do not guarantee success, it can be argued that without either of these, individuals are much less likely to own a nice house or get a decent job to support a family. Similarly, staying out of trouble and having a good attitude are also important to achieving “success” in our society. A criminal record is nearly as crippling as a drug addiction. A criminal record closes many doors and opportunities. An individual with a criminal record may have difficulty finding employment or education, as many colleges and universities are reticent to admit students with criminal histories.

Accounting for Structure and Environmental Obstacles

NAB members spend much of their time emphasizing that every decision an individual makes has consequences. They explain to youths that they make good choices they will be rewarded, whereas if they make bad choices they will be punished. This dichotomy however, may be oversimplified as it does not take into account the influence social structures might have on decision-making or consequences.

NAB members in their conversations with teens, rarely acknowledge the limitations one might face due to social forces. However, during my interviews with NAB members, they often spoke more openly about structural or environmental limitations that some youth do face. In this section, I discuss NAB members’ views of parental influence on children, and the ways in which NAB members perceive schools and school policies, such as zero tolerance, as limiting choices for many children.

Family Obstacles

The interviews revealed that NAB members view family environments to be extremely important to children. This is not entirely surprising considering the discourse in the US surrounding families and parenting in which it is assumed that “good kids” come from “good homes” and “bad kids” come from “bad homes”. For instance, Ferguson (2001) found that school personnel blame home environment for the production of “bad kids”. The notion of bad kids coming from bad homes is something that many of the NAB members support and express.

The following quote is taken from my interview with James, a White volunteer from Plantation Oaks NAB. In this quote, James is elaborating on an early comment he made about parents he views as problematic:

It's sad in the long run though... you can usually tell a good kid, and sometimes great kids come from homes like that. Unfortunately that's not the norm. So you know that even though you've done your best to do corrective action for this child; you know that because of the environment that they're in, their chances are pretty slim.

In James' opinion, which was echoed by several other NAB members, good kids rarely come from bad environments. Thus, his statement reflects the popular discourse that bad kids usually come from bad homes. Through James' statement, and those of other NAB members which I will discuss later, it becomes clear that NAB members view family environment and parental influences as problematic for some teens. Ultimately, bad home environments will influence and limit the choices even good kids can make.

The comments of NAB members about family environments can be categorized into three categories, or three types of obstacles, which may limit the choices of teens. The first, criminal influences, refers to parents whom NAB members appear to find the most problematic. These parents actively encourage their children to break the law. In many ways, criminal influences pose the biggest hurdle to the teens participating in NAB. If NAB members have the goal of teaching children to make better decisions in the future, the influence of their parents may affect their decision-making in the future. The second obstacle is uncooperative parents. These parents are characterized as "bullies" and as making it difficult for their children to complete the NAB program successfully. Finally, there are overwhelmed parents. This category represents a wide range of parents who may have problems of their own, such as alcoholism, or mental or physical health issues. The NAB members I have interviewed consider this to be problematic because these parents are willing yet unable to help their children make good decisions.

One of my earliest interviews was with John, a White volunteer from the Plantation Oaks NAB. Like James, John also commented on the influence of parents, however John offered a more specific view point. When I asked John why he continues to volunteer with NAB, he responded: "Um, I guess, that uh, the appreciation, well many things, [pauses] but I think one of the impactful things is that you walk away thanking your parents." His response caught me off guard. I pushed John further, asking him to clarify what he meant.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

John: Many times, the kids that end up here end up here for a lack of parenting.

Interviewer: Lack of parenting how?

John: Poor examples, the parents provide. [pause] Poor judgment, that the parents provide or execute. Um, you know, I would say that that fifty-percent of the kids that come through the doors, come through our doors because their parents. You know, it's the stopping of a cycle. [chuckles] You know, and they haven't done that. They've carried through the cycle, and the parents don't get it. Uh, they don't get that. For instance, we had a young lady here not long ago who came through for petit theft. And uh, she was a co-defendant, but the other defendant was her mother, and she was in criminal court, grown up court and she had. You know - [pauses] How do you work with a parent on that when they're the ones that brought their kids into it? [laughs]

John's statement is very complex. Initially, he appears to imply that many youth are part of a "cycle" that begins with parents who perhaps have made bad decisions of their own, and have been arrested themselves. As he continues, he references a case he recently worked on, in this case a mother and daughter who had been arrested for petit theft together. Through John's statements, it becomes clear that it is very difficult for NAB members to work with teens whose parents encouraged them to break the law. John also makes a bold statement, "fifty-percent of the kids...come through our doors because of their parents". If we take this to mean that fifty-percent of the children who participate in NAB were encouraged by their parents to break that law, then his claim may be incorrect. On the other hand, John may be referring to problematic family environments in general which, in the opinions of some NAB members, lead kids to make bad decisions.

During my field observations I only encountered one case in which a parent actually encouraged their child to break the law. The fact that, during all of my time in the field, I only encountered one such case may emphasize the rare occurrence of such influences. Although these cases are outliers, it is clear that they leave lasting impressions on NAB members.

During my interviews with Sally and Joe, both White NAB volunteers from Bay View, Jasmine's case was referenced. When I asked Sally to describe one of the most disappointing cases that she has worked on, she referenced Jasmine's case, stating: "There was a young woman who came to us. I think she was 14 or 15, and um [pause] her mom was actually the instigator in the crime that the young person committed. She instigated it. [Pause] She uh, was the one who, uh, practically talked

the young girl into doing it. Then, um, as we, you know, tried to work with her, um, the mom was not engaged and was not supportive." Joe also referenced Jasmine's case in response to a question I asked about the role of parents in NAB. After spending some time discussing what he believes the parents' roles to be, he spoke of Jasmine:

I'm thinking of a young lady we saw a couple months ago I guess...this group of kids in school were beating up her brother... And uh they, they were pickin' on him...and mother gave her a baseball bat and said 'get down there and take care of that'. [Pause] And so she went back and banged up his car and [pause] uh she's a lovely little girl... But her mother, [pause] it was her mother's idea. It wasn't an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It was an eye, ear, nose and throat for an eye [laughs] yeah, real overkill. [Pause] And mother never changed her mind on that, uh, you know, we had her back twice to see us and uh mother never changed her mind...

Although Sally and Joe referenced Jasmine's case in response to different prompts, they both clearly identify her mother as the ultimate source of the problem. Without her mother's encouragement, Jasmine would have never been arrested. In Jasmine's case, according to NAB volunteers, her mother represents an extremely negative influence. Additionally, as Sally points out, her mother was not engaged and was not supportive of her daughter. Finally, Joe adds that she never changed her mind about what happened.

These accounts exemplify the obstacle of criminal influences with which some teens have to contend. For NAB members, parents such as Jasmine's mother, who encouraged her to break the law, will most likely continue to influence their children in negative ways. Their influence may lead children to make bad choices again in the future, thus leading the children into more trouble in the long run. Next, I will discuss the category which I call "uncooperative parents." As the name implies, these parents are characterized by NAB members as being uncooperative and unwilling to help their children.

James, a White volunteer from Plantation Oaks NAB, is one of the NAB members who expressed his frustration with parents who are not supportive. When I asked James to describe what he would call the most disappointing case he referenced cases in which parents have presented problems. While he initially referenced parents who are also their child's co-defendant, he later also referenced parents who have bad attitudes:

[Some parents] come in with tremendous attitudes you know that their gonna come in here and bully us around and get their kids off the hook and that kind of thing, and that usually doesn't turn out so well.

In his response, James constructs some parents as bullies – parents who disregard, and as James implies, disrespects NAB volunteers during hearings. Later James goes on to comment:

We can't force the parents to do anything that they don't want to do. But um, [pause] ultimately you know, if a child is underage, and they don't have a drivers license then somebody's got to get them to these appearances.

In his elaboration, James expresses frustration that NAB members must rely on parents to bring their children to NAB hearings and other places such as Teen Court jury duty, counseling or community service sites. A parent's refusal to cooperate in this manner can be extremely problematic for NAB members. If they are unwilling to help their children through the process, it is not possible for the teen to complete NAB successfully. Ultimately, a parent's refusal to cooperate eliminates a teen's ability to choose whether or not to complete the NAB sanctions.

During one case, a boy's mother confronted NAB members at the Cypress Terrace NAB because she felt that the board was disrespecting her both as a parent and as a person. The board ordered Carter to complete a substance use evaluation and to comply with any recommendations which resulted from the evaluation. As result, Carter was ordered to complete a substance abuse education program; his mother on the other hand was adamantly opposed to this requirement. During one of Carter's rehearings his mother argued against the drug treatment program. She argued, first, that her son did not have a substance abuse problem and, secondly, that her son's participation in the program was a burden on her organizationally and financially because she was out of work at the time and did not have a car.

A few months later, I interviewed Louise, a Black volunteer from Cypress Terrace. During the interview, I asked her if she has ever encountered any difficult parents while working in NAB. It was not surprising that she referenced Carter's mother:

Well, they don't always give us problems. [Pause] But you know, sometimes we get a mother who is just tired. She might be sick, or over worked, she's just tired. [Pause] You know it's hard raising children alone, especially when they get into trouble. [Pause] And sometimes we get a mother who thinks she knows best and wants to tell us what's what, you know – we had a case like that a few months ago. We told her she had to take her son to drug counseling and she didn't want to, she fought us hard. In the end the boy got

a new charge for marijuana, [pause] and she knew we were right all along. [Pause] You know, it's not that we know better than the parents, we don't, we just have more experience with this stuff, you know.

Carter's mother was perhaps the only mother whom I observed who might fit James' "bully" classification, yet ultimately, as Louise seems to understand, Carter's mother may have only been doing what she thought was the best for herself and her son.

In another interview, John, a Plantations Oaks volunteer, also talked about parents whom he called a "pain in the butt." I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by this:

Interviewer: What sort of things the parents were doing? Was it an attitude or the parent refused to take them? Or?

John: An attitude, giving excuses for everything not taking responsibility. You know all of the things we try to teach our children [laughs] that the parents haven't learned. [Ok] Entitlement, you name it. It's not my fault it's somebody else's fault.

Again, in John's example it becomes clear that NAB members sometimes have to work with parents who are uncooperative with board members efforts. In this case, John argues that some parents choose to blame someone else in order to avoid taking responsibility for their child. While I did not encounter such parents during my time in the field, it is clear that NAB members perceive these parents as providing bad example for their children. Rather than supporting their children and encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions, they demonstrate that one should blame others for their problems. For NAB members, this "blame the other" mentality directly contrasts with the world view that they try to teach to the teens, that one must take responsibility for one's actions.

There is a third type of parent which was also discussed by NAB members. These parents are characterized by NAB members as those who have problems of their own which limit their ability to help their children. I call this type the "overwhelmed parent." During my interviews with NAB members, I learned that there are parents who themselves have serious issues which prevent them from helping their children. As James commented during our conversation about difficult parents:

You've got all of their factors coming in you know like alcoholism. I mean, we've had parents that where, [pause] you could smell the alcohol on their breath as they sat across the table from us.

It goes without saying that any parent who shows up to their child's NAB meeting smelling like alcohol has problems of their own which might prevent them from being able to assist their children in making good decisions. For NAB members, it appears that alcohol-abusing parents represent a problem that is entirely different from a "bully" or an uncooperative parent. Rather than defying and opposing board members, a parent with substance use issues may be unable to understand the severity of their child's situation, and thus may be unable to guide them through life and help them make good choices.

An example from my observations of this problem is Casey from Plantation Oaks NAB. As I discussed in the previous section, Casey was terminated from the program because board members felt that she was not being compliant with their requests. However, prior to Casey's rehearing David, a Plantation Oaks board leader, explained to his fellow members:

She's very smart, very active in her school, student government, dance team...Her mother is an English teacher at the school too. Mom's an alcoholic though - I guess as soon as she gets home, she starts drinking...The child [Casey] doesn't feel like she can go home because mom is always drunk.

According to David's comments to the board, Casey's mother's alcoholism has alienated her from her daughter. Thus the NAB members perceive her excessive alcohol use to be problematic for her relationship with her daughter. It is this perception which is key to my argument. NAB members who perceive parents to have their own problems, such as alcoholism, also perceive those parents as unable to help their children. Specifically, it appears that NAB members believe that overwhelmed parents will be unable to help their children to make better choices in the future.

Conclusion

The present study finds NAB members encourage youths to make better choices in the future. They explain to the teens participating in NAB that with every choice one makes comes a reward or a punishment. Specifically, NAB members encourage youths to obey the law, work hard, and have a good attitude. If the youths adhere to these principles, NAB members assure them that their lives will be happy and prosperous. Finally, NAB members also feel frustrated that some of the teens may be unable to overcome environmental obstacles, such as parental influences or school policies, which may ultimately limit their ability to make good choices in the future.

Through my observations of NAB hearings, I found that NAB members appear determined to help the teens participating in the program make better decisions in the future. During their conversations with youths, NAB members emphasized the importance of obeying the law, working and studying hard, and having a good attitude.

In many ways, NAB members construct life as a series of choices that individuals are faced with. Depending on the choice one makes, one will face different consequences; some good and some bad. This system could be visualized as a hallway with a series of doors, with each door representing a choice. As one opens a particular door, it will lead to different rooms, with more doors and choices. Through their conversations with the teens, NAB members make it obvious that some doors lead to rewards, while others lead to misfortune. If one chooses correctly, he or she will have a satisfying life; however, if one makes the wrong choices, he or she may find him or herself in a jail cell or out on the street. This metaphor does not take into account the structural obstacles which one may have to overcome in order to be successful.

While they do not discuss these structural obstacles with the teens participating in the program, NAB members appear to understand there are many environmental factors which may influence children's lives and decisions making. Primarily, NAB members acknowledge parental influence as an important factor which many children will not be able to overcome. Although they are only a very small percentage of the cases NAB members see, there are parents who have encouraged their children to break the law. Additionally, NAB members acknowledge that some parents have troubles of their own, whether they are related to mental health or economic issues which may have negative effects on their children.

Herein lays a contradiction: although NAB members acknowledge certain environmental factors which may influence or limit the choices teens make, they do not express this to the teens participating in the program. Unfortunately, I did not ask NAB members why they do not discuss these environmental barriers with the teens participating in the program. Additionally, this contradiction may be left unresolved due to the limited number of cases I have observed. However, the source of this contradiction may be found within Cohen's middle-class measuring rod.

In describing the ethic of individual responsibility, Cohen writes, "this means that a person should make his own way in the world by dint of his own efforts" (1955, p. 92). The ethic of individual responsibility is perhaps one of the most celebrated middle-class values in our society today. This is evident in research on entitlement

policies such as welfare and healthcare reform. Specifically, arguments against welfare and healthcare reform reflect individualistic ideals that individuals should essentially “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”. Additionally, almost daily, we read and hear news stories of individuals who have overcome incredible obstacles to become successful. This ethic of individualism is one which, as we have seen, NAB members emphasize repeatedly. In my observations, NAB members consistently reminded teens that individual actors make choices in life and are rewarded or punished for those choices. In this paradigm, the individual is paramount. It may be the case that in order to solidify this lesson that NAB members must ignore structural factors and instead focus on individual agency.

Michelle Inderbitzin has published a series of articles (2006, 2007a, 2007b) which also examine the influence of middle-class values in the juvenile justice system. Although Inderbitzin’s work focuses on juvenile correction facilities, rather than community based restorative justice programs, she offers valuable insights into the ways in which facility staff use middle-class values, primarily the attainment of wealth through legitimate means, to shape the correctional process. Several of Inderbitzin’s findings are closely related to those presented in this paper.

In her study of staff members working in a boys’ correctional facility, Inderbitzin (2006) found that staff members felt that the facility provided the “first real structure and consistency that many of the boys had ever know” (p.439). She elaborates on this point noting that in such instances staff members made “extra efforts to mentor the boys” (Inderbitzin, 2006, p. 439). Furthermore, she found that staff members often claimed that “problem children come from problem parents” (Inderbitzin, 2006, p.349). These claims are echoed by my own, wherein NAB members present poor home environments as obstacles which may prevent some youths from making “good choices”. Furthermore, it appears that in some cases NAB members attempt to provide positive role models for youths participating in the program. This is primarily accomplished through their use of storytelling (see Nora’s story about her brother) in which a troubled young person was able to turn their life around through education and hard work. Unfortunately however, it appears that NAB members mentoring of these troubled youth begins and ends with storytelling.

While the present study provides new insights into the interactions between NAB members and the teens and families participating in the program, there is still much left that needs to be understood. For instance, future research should further explore the contradiction which I have identified. By including more cases and interviewing NAB members about this contradiction, we may better understand why NAB members do not discuss structural or environmental burdens with teens.

Additionally, future studies should explore the implications of board member perceptions of attitude. As seen earlier, board members who perceived a particular youth to have a “bad attitude” often confront the child. Future research into community-based programs should explore this issue further. For example, do different boards appear to perceive attitudes differently? To which degree are perceptions of a bad attitude rooted in miscommunications or cultural misunderstandings?

Furthermore, while I was in the field, I often wondered “what are these kids thinking right now? Are they really buying into this?” For example, the “cautionary tales” or threats, in which NAB members tell teens that using drugs and stealing will ultimately lead them to into a jail cell or a life on the streets, may not reflect a teen’s experience. Certainly, there are teens who participate in NAB who know people who regularly use marijuana or shoplift and have never been in trouble. Additionally, the other teens they may know who steal or use drugs may hold high social status in their peer groups. In future research, it would be beneficial to interview the children and families who have participated in NAB. Specifically, these interviews could explore the ways in which children interpret and react to their interactions with volunteers. Ultimately, understanding the reactions and interpretations of youths participating in programs like NAB is important to develop better sanctions and training for NAB volunteers.

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