

Choosing Compassion: Learning from Disadvantaged African-American Youth About A “Home in the Heart” for Peace

Presentation for Conference in Honor of
Blessed Pope John XXIII’s Encyclical, “Pacem in Terris”

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Essential contributions of *Pacem in Terris*

- Conviction that there is a foundation of peace, by God's grace, in the heart of every person (despite animosities of Cold War),
- Commitment to human rights, bridging racial and ethnic divisions, and recognizing that justice secures peace
- Today: a window into that “home in the heart for peace” based on findings from our participatory action program with severely disadvantaged youth on Chicago's South Side



Problems to which Empowering Counseling Program responds

- “Social exclusion” of disadvantaged African-American youth from social services:
 - Mental health and other support services less available than for privileged youth, despite greater risk and need
 - African-American youth often perceive services as irrelevant (studies report 30-60% discontinue mental health services)
 - Services often have little impact on youths’ decisions (ex: perpetual problem of grave risk for STDs, unplanned pregnancy, dating violence, trafficking and prostitution despite psycho-educational programming)
- Public and academic knowledge base:
 - “Evidence-base” does not include disadvantaged youths’ strengths and services
 - Needs youths’ perspectives about their strengths, and what makes services meaningful

Empowering Counseling Program

- Participatory action process based on partnership with disadvantaged residents of Bronzeville and Woodlawn, active since 2006
- Based on residents' grief and outrage about the impact of community violence and educational disadvantage on their youth, we prioritized two types of school-based services:
 - After School Program for youth, “Stand Up Help Out” (www.standuphelpout.com)
 - Counseling program for children, youth and their families
 - Have served 500 children and youth
 - Have provided 38 social work internships and graduate student stipends
- Carried out by social work students (advanced B.S.W., M.S.W., and Ph.D.) supervised by adjunct faculty and PI
- Participatory action research process: Youth co-evaluate, co-create services, are co-researchers

Summary of what we did

- Modified theoretical guidelines for service provision: Using bases of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan), strengths-based approaches (Saleebey), ecological approaches (Garbarino), and empowerment approaches (Gutierrez)
- Resulted in maximal engagement of youth (99%)
- Research findings (articles co-authored with youth, dissertations) about services from the perspectives of disadvantaged African-American youth
- Five years of youth-led program evaluation (N=203) resulted in: Accumulation of care model of after school services provision (intensive counseling and peer support for youth who in turn mentor community children)

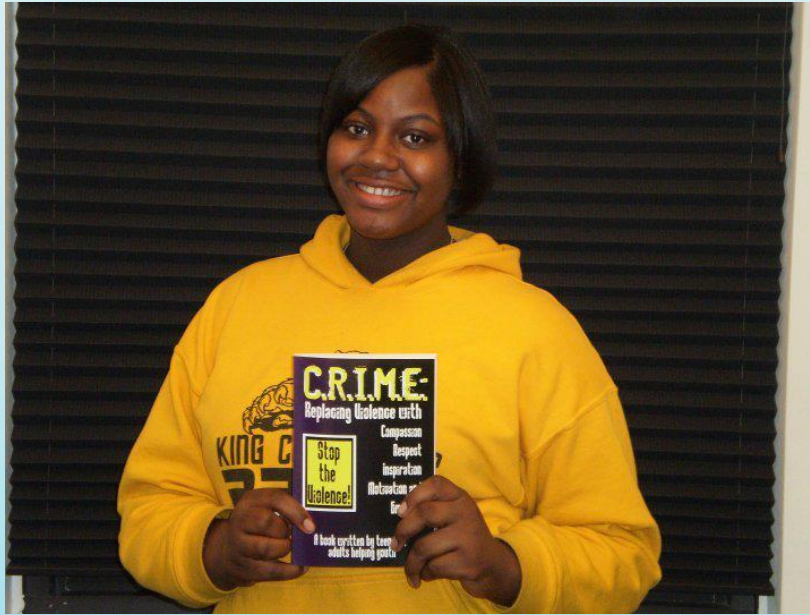
Youths' accomplishments to date

- Authored several reports and documentaries (see www.standuphelpout.org),
- Three books:
 - *Replacing CRIME with Compassion, Respect, Inspiration, Motivation, and Empathy*, (guide for practitioners)
 - *Suluhu Meets the Bully* (children's book)
 - *How to Love your Love Life: The Stand Up Help Out Guide to Dating*
- Workbooks for children and peers (*ABC's of Peace, Your Rights, Your Love Life*),
- Conducted community forums, including “Voices of We Who are Violence-Free” in response to drive-by shootings menacing youth
- Made presentations around Chicago to children, peers, and adults about alternatives to violence, including *Windy City Live* (2/28/2013)



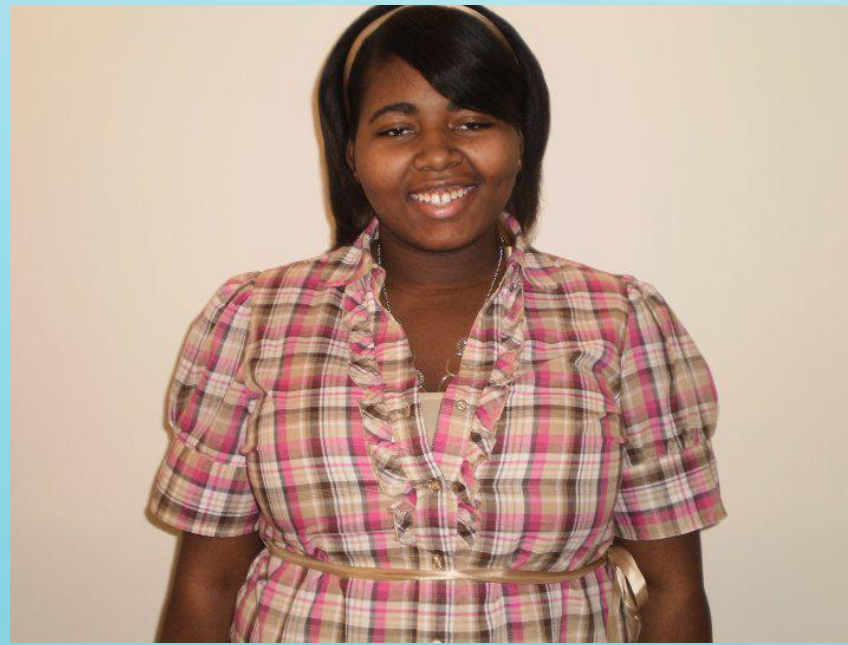
Stand Up Help Out Youth Presenting at Community Forum, Summer, 2010

King Sami (co-researcher in Compassion project, now in 3rd year of Monmouth College) with Kenyatti Hellum (co-author of CRIME book, still attends SUHO)



Proud Co-Authors

Desiree Tellis, now attending DePaul University



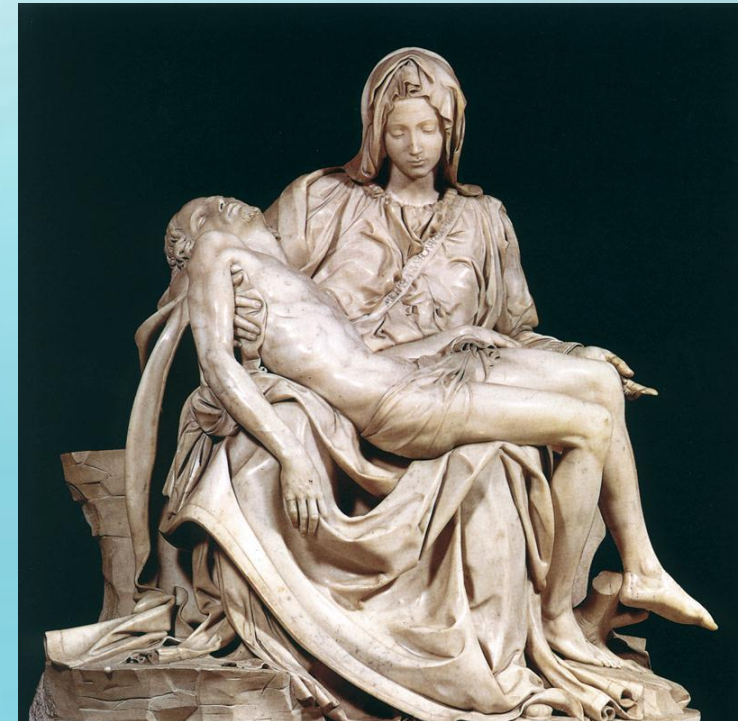
Daria Silar, now attending Grand Valley State University

Violence and the antidote of compassion

- The violence and poverty-related trauma the youth are subjected to is even greater than commonly known
 - Last year 6 drive-by shootings menaced our after-school program
 - 30% of youth know someone acutely suicidal or who committed suicide
 - Every participant knew someone who had been killed in community violence
 - All experienced severe corporal punishment in families
 - Many lacked funds for basic needs: food, clothing, transportation, health care, a bed
- Because youth said what meant the most to them about ECP services was receiving compassion and giving compassion, we explored what compassion means to them

Literature Review: Multidisciplinary Interest in Compassion

- Brain research, “mirror neurons”: Iacoboni, Decety
- Brain science and Buddhism: Davidson & Harrington
- Brain science and psychotherapy: “Interpersonal neurobiology”: Daniel Siegel’s “mindsight”
- Psychotherapy and Buddhism: Gilbert
- Law, philosophy, and social policy: Martha Nussbaum
- Sociology of acts of compassion: Wuthnow
- Pastoral care: Fr. Henri Nouwen
- Social justice: Martin Luther King
- Social services and trauma: Figley, Canda
- Buddhism: Dalai Lama



Process of data gathering and analysis

- Participatory action approach: including youth interviewers and co-authors
 - Provided training and supervision for youth,
 - Elicited feedback from interviewers and interviewees about research process
 - Youth said interviewing same-sex peers yielded the best information (reported awkwardness around opposite-sex peers)
- Data gathering methods
 - Individual interviews developed over several iterations: N=97
 - Focus groups
 - Administration of standardized scales (measuring empathy, compassionate love, in Phase 1 only – then dropped them because of lack of validity)
- Qualitative analysis using first thematic analysis developed into coding manual, and then Atlas – ti

Findings

- In this desert of disadvantage and violence, compassion was universal and bloomed within every young person
- All youth defined compassion and gave examples of giving and receiving it (regardless of how dysfunctional or abused they had been)

Youths' Definitions of Elements of Compassion

Three aspects: Love, virtue, and trust

- “A flow of love that pushes you”
- Virtue: “Someone who is good, someone who treats others with respect and kind, mature;”
“the good in people”
- “It’s basically like saying another term for trust”;
authenticity and honesty

Example: Acting to improve community problems

“Just [helping] us put on this community nonviolence forum... Us altogether reaching out towards the community to promote nonviolence within our community because it's very high, that alone just shows compassion... when you actually try to do something about the problem, that is when it really works the most.”

Because anybody can say, “okay, there's violence.” But for that one person, or that group of people that's going to actually stand up and say, “We don't like the violence. We think that there are ways that you can go about a situation with a nonviolent approach,” just knowing that and knowing that **everyday when I walk outside of my house I'm faced with “okay, this might be my last day to live.”** With the gun, with the gun violence, because...I've even lost count of how many kids died ...due to gun violence and acts of violence. So just knowing that, and knowing that we, as Stand Up! Help Out! want to make a change and a difference in our community, that's just amazing to me.”

Example: Helping family member in grief

“Someone in my family, they recently died.. And like everyone was sad or whatever. But like I was trying to tell them that like ‘she’s in a better place now. She’s like better off now than living in the world.’ Like I was trying to help them and that’s the way I show compassion...I was at first too, but then I was like, I tried to think of the better things. And that kind of helped me get over it...I think they were looking like ‘wow, if someone that young,’ ‘cause they are all older than me, so ‘if someone that young can understand it like this, then it’s not hard for us to try it.’” (#48)

Example: Reciprocating parental love

“One experience of compassion that I have and I always hold deeply is with my mom because ah where I live it’s just me and my mom, that’s a woman that’s taken care of me all of my life so if there is anybody I have compassion for its her and my family. On mother’s day I got her a gift and just basically that day I tell her I love her cause tomorrow is not promised...God forbid that it happened, that something happened to you or her ... You just want her to always know and for her to let you always know that y’all love each other. I think that makes her feel special and cause some kids don’t have the love like that I have for my momma so just to know that her child love her that much, I think that just makes her happy.” (#44)

Example: Helping a mentee (child)

“My mentee, she seems to like catch a quick attitude if she doesn’t get her way. And I was talking to her, I was recently talking to her on Tuesday about it. I kept on asking her like “what’s bothering you” because she seemed like something was really bothering her. So I kept on asking her and she didn’t really say anything to me, but she gave me a hug. And I guess when she hugged me she felt better. And then, after that, she was her normal self all over again...I think **maybe she just needed somebody there to care about her and ask, actually ask her “what’s bothering you?”** because it makes it seem like somebody is there for you and actually cares about your feelings.” (#47)

Example: Helping a hostile new student become a friend

“What feels good is that they tell me they’re there for me if I want to talk about it... like, some girl, she was having a problem and they kept on asking her “what’s wrong? What’s wrong?” So this girl was like “well forget them.” She wasn’t going to tell them. So I was like “no, you can’t do that. You just got to give her time. She’s going to tell you on her own time.” You can’t force anybody. You can only help a person so far in their life, and then they have to be on their own at a certain point... **I’m not just backing down and leaving her with the problem.** Because, if you leave a person with the problem, then they might handle it the wrong way... Because some people like, they may not have had that role model or that mother or father to help them growing up, and they may not know how to deal with a certain problem. So, as a friend, you should be there for them.” (#47)

Example: Helping a stranger

“I think when you have a feeling, you need to do something right or it’s gonna, it’s gonna come from your heart. Like love comes from, I mean love, when you love someone, you love from your heart. That’s why I think they have a symbol of a heart. And so I think it comes from your heart...”

This lady, she was a senior citizen and, uh, she couldn’t carry all of her bags. She was on the bus. And, uh, I got up and helped her with her bags and I gave her my seat...she was kind of struggling with the bags. But, when I helped her, she had a smile on her face and she was like ‘thank you, thank you a lot’...she offered me money but I didn’t accept it....Because I didn’t think I have to, I don’t need, I don’t deserve... I mean like, well, **I don’t need to be rewarded for doing something nice...by money; I wouldn’t be rewarded by money. All I need is really a ‘thank you.’**” (#45)

Example: Forgiving someone who shot at her

“We were coming home together and there was a shot and we fell on the ground. They didn’t hit us. I knew who I was with I knew it wasn’t [gangs.] I knew it was a mistake. My older sister found out who did it, I was right.

I thought and thought and I decided, I have to forgive them. Their life will be ruined if I tell. I told her to tell them – I forgive you but you have to stop shooting, you have to stop.”

The inner experience of the person giving compassion

- Not needing to solve the other person's problem for her/him, but rather caring, respect, commitment to be with the person as s/he tries to solve the problem
- Pleasure of connectedness (by contrast with vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue): "I felt good. I felt real happy that I had helped somebody somehow" (#45)
- Most felt certainty (not doubting what needs to be done), but some felt "awkward," not sure what was the right thing to do
- Satisfaction: "Compassion towards others makes me feel good...makes me feel that I have a place in this world"

The inner experience of the person receiving compassion

- Feeling valued and cared for: “I called thirty minutes late and she was really worried about me and she was praying. I couldn’t get to no phone or nothing but I was supposed to come home....[then when she called all my friends] It feels like I got someone like looking over my shoulder and caring for me.” (#8)
- Feeling connected with others rather than alone: “I feel relief, like ‘somebody’s helping me.’ And then I’ll be, I’ll feel happy.” (#45)
- Feeling respected (rather than pitied)
- Feeling one can change problems (personal and community) that otherwise feel hopeless
- Hope: with realistic goals, pathways to accomplishing goals, and conviction of one’s competence to do so (A.J. Snyder’s theory)

Youths' opinions about the development of compassion

- Innate: You're born with it: "did you ever know anyone without some good in them?"
- Acquired: "You're not necessarily born with compassion for others. It's something that, like a process that you have to go through. 'Cause I know when I was younger, like in middle school, I wouldn't really care about anybody else's problems; I'd just care about myself. But then I learned, like when other people didn't care about my problems, how that made me feel. So everybody needs somebody to talk to, so that like changed me or transformed me into having more compassion toward others".

Choosing Compassion

- We found quantifying amounts of compassion in each person (scales) to be invalid
- Instead, we came to focus on the issue of choice: Since everyone experiences compassion, we asked 27 of the 97 about the decision-making process entailed in whether or not to express felt compassion

Obstacles to expressing compassion

- Fear of betrayal, rejection, or shame at being “gamed”
- Fear of harm (of being robbed, beaten)
- “I was trying to fit in with the kids. I didn't say nothing; I just let [bullying] go on instead of stopping it.”
- Not knowing someone (fear of stranger)
- Preoccupation with self: “They don't ... really take account on other people's feelings on how they would feel. They just think about their self at that time.”

Withholding compassion feels...

“It actually felt pretty bad because like, when we was in 6th grade, I wasn't really with the kids that was doing it [bullying], but she was, I wouldn't tell anyone to stop or anything. And then like, later, during that year, she had killed herself. So then, it was like I felt like I probably could have stopped that if, had I taken action...”

Why choose compassion?

- Reciprocating love: “Because I love her... she takes care of me all the time... since birth...”
- The pleasure of connection: “You could gain a friendship”
- “It’s the right thing to do”:
 - many youth described peacemaking between fighting peers
 - “It doesn't matter if they are enemies; if you need help, I'm going to help you, so I would just do that.”
- Passing it on: “It’s a lot of stuff you can do to avoid certain situations [like suicide of suffering person] ... and then somebody was compassionate to me that day [when my brother passed] and I think about that when I see other people down and then I just show compassion to them.”

Compassion is “the flow that pushes you”

- Objectively: the moment of compassion is intensely personal, localized to time and place,
- Subjectively: youth experience compassion as relational: not bound to time or place, nor as a static “trait” but as enduring through time, over different contexts and relationships
- The experience of compassion resides in a reflective space within each person
 - Memories of giving and receiving compassion are associated with pleasure, hope, increased self-determination, deepened connection with others, a fulfilled ideal for justice
 - Memories of when compassion was withheld (either from oneself or for others) are painful and motivate persons to choose compassion in the future
 - Acts of compassion are not mere imitation but are creatively generated within that reflective space, from what one did not receive as well as from what one did receive

Towards a better future for serving disadvantaged youth

Can we value as part of the evidence used to develop “evidence-based treatments” the service factors child and youth clients regard as meaningful (such as compassion)?

Our power lies in that “home in the heart for peace”

Pacem in Terris 165: “The world will never be the dwelling place of peace, till peace has found a home in the heart of each and every man, till every man preserves in himself the order ordained by God to be preserved.”

The Empowering Counseling Program has not had a lot of resources, and our instructors and counselors have student-level skills –

our young clients told us that the greatest power we had to bring about change lay not in resources or skills, but in compassion –

Blessed Pope John 23 had it right -- Because of our human nature – who we are -- with a little, a lot can be done



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- * the youth of SUHO, who offered the privilege of their partnership and continual inspiration.