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Applied Developmental Science, Social Justice, and Socio-Political Well-Being

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Applied Developmental Science, Social Justice, and Socio-Political Well-Being

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In this article we present a vision of applied developmental science (ADS) as a means of promoting social justice and socio-political well-being. This vision draws upon the field's significant accomplishments in identifying and strengthening developmental assets in marginalized youth communities, understanding the effects of poverty and racial discrimination on individual and family well-being and promoting positive development through youth civic engagement programs. It also highlights potential linkages between ADS and other social science fields working to identify and eliminate societal barriers to human development.

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One of the defining characteristics of applied developmental science (ADS) is that theory, research, and its application in the real world are interwoven, each informing and enriching the other (Fisher & Lerner, 1994, 2005; Fisher et al., 1993; Lerner, 2010; Sherrod, Busch-Rossnagel, & Fisher, 2004). Over the past three decades this ADS orientation has transformed how investigators and policy makers conceptualize and strive to optimize development across the life course. The field has had significant accomplishments in designing and evaluating interventions that strengthen developmental assets in marginalized youth communities and in promoting positive development through youth civic engagement programs (Benson, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; J. L. Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Browning, Burrington, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Jopp, Rott, & Oswald, 2008; Lerner & Benson, 2003; Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2010). The design of ecologically relevant prevention programs by applied developmental scientists has also illuminated the need for social policies sensitive to diverse developmental challenges and inclusive in their offering of opportunities for individuals from different cultural, economic, and social positions (Huston, 2008; Kenny, Horne, Orpinas, & Reese, 2009; Scales et al., 2008).

Although the field has made great strides in conceptualizing, operationalizing, and empirically disentangling multi-level transactional effects on development, challenges remain in identifying empirical and practical ways to address the pervasive influence of social, economic, and political macro-systems on development. In this article we draw upon the field's significant advances to present a vision of ADS that begins to empirically address systemic disparities in opportunities for development and contribute to the promotion of social justice and socio-political well-being.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL INEQUITIES

Definitions of social justice and its corollary, social inequities, focus on "societal structures, policies, and hierarchies that limit access to resources based on

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group or individual characteristics including age, race, ethnicity, social class, poverty, religion, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation and language" (Kenny & Romano, 2008, p. 22). ADS has addressed many elements of a social justice perspective in its focus on the multilevel correlates of developmental risk and resilience, evidence based development promoting interventions, policy analysis, and community engagement (Benson, 2003b; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Fisher & Lerner, 1994, 2005; Fisher et al., 1993; Fisher, Murray, & Sigel, 1996; Higgins-D'Allesandro, Hamilton, & Fisher, 1998; Lerner, 2004, 2010; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000a, 2000b; Sherrod, Busch-Rossnagel, & Fisher, 2004). These contributions are tempered by small effect sizes (McCartney & Rosenthal, 2000), difficulty in constructing programs that can adequately address the diverse and multiple individual and contextual factors that result in cumulative risks (Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006; Lochman, 2004; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Timberlake 2007), challenges in sustaining experimental prevention programs once they are proven successful (Balsano, 2005; Hyman, 2002; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008), and the disjuncture between the pace of science and that of legislation (Huston, 2008; Shonkoff, 2000). Many of these challenges stem from systemic inequities that pose challenges to all applied sciences dedicated to promoting social justice (Kenny & Romano, 2008).

Social Inequities as Structural Violence

In his classic book *Pathologies of Power*, Paul Farmer (2003), the physician and medical anthropologist best known for his humanitarian work in Haiti, describes how extreme and relative poverty and social inequalities related to racism, gender, and other forms of discrimination are offenses against human dignity that are so grave in their damaging effect on well-being that they can be conceptualized as a form of sanctioned violence. Entrenched structural violence based on social class and race/ethnicity is characterized by pervasive structuring of disparities in access to health care, housing in safe neighborhoods, educational resources, occupational opportunities and the resultant narrowing of life options. Social suffering, defined as the experience of entrenched structural violence at the individual and collective level (Bourgois, Lettiere, & Quesdada, 1997) can have a "weathering effect" (Geronimus et al., 2006) on development across the life span through acute and chronic experience with social and economic adversity and political marginalization. These experiences result in persistent high-effort coping, which in turn leads to feelings of powerlessness and early health deterioration (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005; Hart & Atkins, 2002).

Social Justice and Prevention Science

In their classic article on social justice and prevention science, Albee and Ryan-Finn (1993) argued that the biological and tertiary approaches to prevention characteristic of the time had the iatrogenic effect of maintaining an inequitable social order as a consequence of focusing on individual risks and remedies. To draw attention to the importance of including social justice in social science research, they proposed an incident formula in which mental and emotional distress is a direct function of environmental conditions that foster oppression and inequity divided by the strengths of individual and group to resist the negative effects of oppression. Substituting well-being across development for mental health, the formula would predict that the incidence of developmental problems is a function of systemic conditions fostering oppression and unfair disparities in access to social capital and material resources divided by the strengths of the individual, family, and community to resist the negative effects of oppression. This conceptual formula highlights the fact that the more systemic influences are powerful, influential, sustained, transgenerational, and cumulative the greater the denominator resources must be. The formula also suggests that prevention programs designed to strengthen individual and family resources may chip away at the overwhelming effects of oppression and social injustice, but the balance will never be achieved unless the numerator is similarly addressed.

PSYCHOPOLITICAL WELL-BEING AND PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY

Prilleltensky (2003) has introduced the concept of psychopolitical well-being into community prevention science discourse. Psychopolitical well-being is understood in terms of the processes of oppression and liberation. Oppression has been variously defined in terms of its source and consequences (Gil, Vega, & Biafora, 1998; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003; Mulroy & Austin, 2004, p. 30). For example, Prilleltensky and his colleagues (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994, 1996; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002) define it as "a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, whereby the controlling person or group exercise its power by processes of political exclusion and violence and by psychological dynamics of appreciation" (Prilleltensky, 2003, p. 195). The antidote to oppression are processes that promote "liberation," defined as the process of resisting oppressive forces and striving toward psychological and political well-being (Prilleltensky, 2003). Whereas oppression denies group members of their rights, liberation promotes their recovery.

According to Prilleltensky (2003) the challenge for social scientists is to incorporate notions of oppression and liberation into their research and prevention strategies. On that basis he suggests that the validity of research and empirically based interventions should include evaluation of the degree to which they incorporate knowledge of the sources, experiences, and consequences of oppression, the power dynamics operating at the psychological and political levels, and whether prevention strategies include promotion of psychological and political liberation in the personal, relational, and collective domains. In the language of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), oppression and social inequity are macrosystem influences or what Bronfenbrenner (1974) termed "enduring factors" in development that are mediated through the ecological levels nested within it. From this perspective, psychopolitical validity in developmental science requires studies of human development and policy analysis that consider the pervasive and distal socio-cultural sources and influences of oppression on other ecological levels and that develop preventive interventions that aim to transform these influences through changes toward liberation at the personal, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural levels, that is, the transformation of oppressive social structures.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

There is a growing and significant body of empirical research in applied developmental science illuminating the importance of civic engagement to positive youth development, to adult functioning, and to the sustainability and continued evolution of a civil society that supports freedom and social justice (Benson, 2006; Lerner, 2002, 2005; Lerner, Abo-Zena et al., 2009; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2000a, 2000b; Lerner & Overton, 2008; Levine & Youniss, 2006; Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, & Bertelsen, 2005; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). The study and examination of programs promoting civic engagement is one part of a new approach to guide youth research and policy that replaces the traditional research focus on problem behaviors and developmental risk with a conceptualization of youth as a community resource (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). This more nuanced concept of development includes the study of individual assets (cognitive and social competencies, positive values, and a healthy identity) and environmental assets (caring adults, positive adult and peer role models, safe and healthy neighborhoods, and stimulating academic environments) (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Leffert et al., 1998; Lerner et al., 2005; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Loder & Hirsch, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Sherrod, 2003, 2005; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Sherrod, Quinones, & Davila, 2004; Tolan, Sherrod, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2004; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010).

In this framework, civic engagement in youth and early adulthood sets the groundwork for skills that can sustain positive developmental trajectories that will result in individual and community benefits (Benson, 2006; Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011; Leffert et al., 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). However, the field is only beginning to grapple with how structural issues and social inequities result in the maintenance of a status quo that empowers some youth but marginalizes others (Benson, Mannes, Pittman, & Ferber, 2003; Scales et al., 2008; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). One promising area is the study of neighborhood effect.

Neighborhood Effects

Data on structural impediments to civic engagement has only begun to surface in political development research. A fruitful area of applied developmental science research has focused on neighborhood influences on children's development. This blend of sociological and psychological science methodologies owes a debt to Sampson's influential social disorganization theory (Sampson, 1992, 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 1994). This theory draws attention to how collective and aggregate neighborhood characteristics influence neighborhood processes which in turn influence developmental outcomes. In recent years investigators have examined mediators and moderators of neighborhood level developmental risk (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Roosa, Jones, Tein, & Cree, 2003).

For example, youth living in urban or rural environments where adult political participation is low and civic education opportunities to engage in clubs and teams is lacking, lag behind suburban adolescents in civic knowledge and civic participation (Dearing et al., 2009; Fauth, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005; Williams, Davis, Cribbs, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). In addition, living in unsafe, impoverished, conflict ridden, and stressful environments can produce civic marginalization by: a) robbing youth of a sense of trust toward adults (who are expected to protect them from harm); b) contributing to a lack of strong formal and informal structures to supervise teenage peer groups; and c) creating negative expectations toward the ability to implement positive and meaningful change in these communities

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(Balsano, 2005; Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005; Fisher, Jackson, & Villarruel, 1998; McLloyd & Wilson, 1991; Witherspoon, Schotland, Way, & Hughes, 2009).

One of the process concepts applicable to a neighborhood community involves "community competence" (Fellin, 2001, p. 70), namely, the capacity of the neighborhood residents and service providers to engage in a process of identifying community needs, coordinating services, and/or facilitating problem solving related to community concerns or conflict resolution. Structural inadequacies in educational, medical, and law enforcement facilities and policies can also be impediments to neighborhood collective efficacy, defined as the shared belief among community members that together they are capable of working together for the common good (Browning et al., 2008; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Sampson, 2001).

Political Oppression and Civic Engagement

Since Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians constitute higher proportions of urban living youth than in the country as a whole, they may be more at risk for civic marginalization, especially if youth-serving organizations do not recognize the need to incorporate sensitivity to civic subcultures and context-appropriate civic opportunities (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Timberlake, 2007). Historically, civic engagement by citizens of color was discouraged because of its potential to challenge the legitimacy of "White" privilege in American society and politics (Jacobson & Frye, 1991; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002). A fruitful extension of civic engagement and positive youth development is the study of how policies and ideologies influence civic marginalization of youth and adults.

Political marginalization can be characterized at the socio-cultural level as the systemic exclusion of specific groups from democratic participation as a function of exclusionary or corrupt government structures. These influences can be illuminated through analysis of laws that permit redistricting of voting areas to nullify minority influences on local elections, lobbying and campaign finance laws that permit groups with more economic power to have a disproportionate influence on electoral politics and acts of Congress, and pervasive cultural ideologies that sustain racial and other forms of group inequities. Political oppression can also be assessed at the community and organizational levels through analysis of local voting registration laws that discourage or promote voter registration by oppressed groups, tactics designed to decrease or increase voting through scare tactics or "get out the vote" drives, respectively, and fragmentation and competition among and within oppressed groups for political power that dilutes group influence. Such policies prevent oppressed groups from influencing laws that affect distribution of economic resources and government programs directed toward their interests. While civic marginalization within racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States is influenced by contextual and interpersonal variables associated with impoverished neighborhoods, it is compounded by structural barriers to positive youth development created by historical and current racist ideologies and institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM, SOCIO-POLITICAL VALIDITY, AND PSYCHOPOLITICAL WELL-BEING

Institutional racism has been defined in terms of institutional structures and processes passed on from generation to generation that organize and promote racial inequity throughout the culture via institutional structures, ideological beliefs, and personal everyday actions of people in the culture (Jones, 1997, p. 472). Racism is rooted in an ideology of inferiority that categorizes, ranks, and differentially allocates societal resources to human population groups that manifests itself in racial/ethnic disparities in criminal justice, employment, economic resources, health, and education (Griffith, Moy, Reischl, & Dayton, 2006; Pettigrew, 2004; Williams & Rucker, 2000).

Racism in the United States has a long history marked by social and political constructions of group differences governed by the political and social interests of the ruling racial caste (Anderson & Massey, 2001; Miles, 1989; Fisher, 1999; Fisher et al., 1998). As a social construction, "race" reflects a division of individuals into groups rooted in historical racial oppression translated into locally prescribed ways of thinking about social groups and institutionalized inequities in access to economic, political, and social resources (Fisher et al., 1997). Categorizing individuals into socially constructed racial groupings has been used to exclude members of these groups from full participation in the U.S. political system (Almaguer, 1994; Ignatiev, 1995). As such "race" is very real in its continuing effects on practices of segregation and exclusion, distribution of wealth, health disparities, and concentration of political and economic power in groups that have explicitly or implicitly benefited from the racist past (Blanchard & Lurie, 2004; Durrheim, Hook, & Riggs, 2009; Saha et al., 2003). Institutional racism also contributes to treatment refusal rates based on cultural/racial distrust or perceived discrimination (Do et al., 2010; Fisher, 2003; Fisher et al., 2008; Fisher & Wallace, 2000; Hammond, 2010; White 2005). In the all-too-recent past, research has been used to justify racist policies

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and demeaning stereotypes (Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006; Griffith et al., 2006; Helms, 1993; Fisher, 1999; Fisher et al., 2002; Laosa, 1985; Ponterotto, 1993; Tyack 1995; Trimble & Fisher, 2006).

Racism and Positive Youth Development

Research on race and development within ADS has made great strides in recent years, illuminating how children and youth experience racial/ethnic discrimination and how racial/ethnic identity, parental socialization practices, and the racial/ethnic ecology of schools and neighborhoods mediate the effects of perceived discrimination (J. S. Brown, Meadows, & Elder, 2007; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Pahl & Way, 2006; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010; Spencer, 2006; Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). A small body of empirical studies is also emerging on the cumulative effects of societal racism on older adult mental and physical health (Henry & Sears, 2009; Merritt, Bennett, Williams, Edwards, & Sollers, 2006; Moody-Ayers, Stewart, Covinsky, & Inouye, 2005; Utsey, Payne, Jackson, & Jones, 2002). In so doing, developmental researchers have moved away from a limited conception of race as phenotypic expressions of group genotypical characteristics to an understanding of race/ethnicity as social constructions that are continuously changing in dynamic interaction with social contexts (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Duster, 2006; Fisher et al., 2002).

In addition, ADS research has begun to converge with data from other areas of the social sciences in illuminating how racist ideology and behaviors develop in majority groups through intra- and inter-racial group contact and friendships (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Hamm, 2000; Pahl & Way, 2006; J. Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; Kohatsu et al., 2000; McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Daly, & Neal, 2006; McGlothlin, Killen, & Edmonds, 2005; Molina & Wittig, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Yip et al., 2010). The field is only beginning to tackle methodologies to identify and change the systemic structures that support and sustain racism and unjust disparities in opportunities for health and human development.

"Dismantling Racism"

To address entrenched racial inequities, Griffith et al. (2007) provided an innovative model called "dismantling racism" that is consistent with and complementary to the goals of civic engagement and positive youth development. This model takes a systems-level approach to promoting individual and collective political empowerment (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003) through increasing knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity to address institutional racism, social injustices, and racial inequities within organizations and communities.

According to Griffith et al. (2007), institutional racism operates through three levels of organization conceptually similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) series of nested ecological systems: individual, intra-organizational, and extra-organizational. At the individual level, racism operates through staff members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. One barrier to interventions aimed at reducing the toxic effects of racism at this level is the reluctance of service providers to believe that their own behaviors, those of their peers, and their institution's policies are rooted in a history of racism and segregation in the provision of services (Geiger, 2006; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). Failures of service providers to recognize their role in sustaining racist practices occur because these attitudes and practices are embedded within the intra-organizational level that perpetuates racial disparities through an organization's internal climate, policies, and procedures and relationships among staff, all of which is rooted in formal and informal hierarchies and power relationships (Griffith et al., 2007).

Thus, while critical to correcting racial/ethnic service inequities, interventions focused exclusively on staff cultural competency training will have limited effectiveness (Horner et al., 2004). Interventions addressed at the organizational level also face resistance because explicit and implicit racial inequities in these settings reflect a reciprocal relationship between these organizations and the larger extra-organizational level influences at the community, state, and federal levels.

The dismantling racism approach uses "anti-racist community organizing" as a strategy designed to illuminate where to intervene in ways that reduce individual, intra-organizational, and extra-organizational factors. It brings stakeholders together to increase their collective power to resolve disparities, hold those in power accountable to principles of justice and equity, at the same time promoting empowerment for all involved (Jones, 2003). The approach requires multi-racial partnerships of people with a common understanding of the problem and a commitment to antiracist community organizing. It involves stakeholders uncovering how power and racism are made manifest, how they affect organizational infrastructure, and how dismantling strategies can contribute to reconceptualization and improvement in organizational mission and functions.

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APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE: LIBERATING SOCIO-POLITICAL WELL-BEING

Liberation psychology draws on Prilleltensky's psychopolitical validity model to include in the study of youth political development an understanding of the political, economic, cultural, and other systemic forces that shape society and shape developmental progressions in political knowledge, identity, the sense of individual and collective self-efficacy, and civic engagement (Bandura, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2003; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts et al., 2003). Through the use of innovative multi-level research designs, this model challenges ADS to go beyond the study of individual, interpersonal, and local community resources to generate knowledge that will transform ineffective or oppressive social ideologies, policies, and institutions.

For example, the psychopolitical validity framework challenges the efficacy of political development theories focused on promoting intergenerational transfer arguing that this approach serves to sustain current conceptions of civic institutions. Instead, liberation psychology stresses the value of "replacement" theory in conceptualizing political development as a resource for correcting societal injustices perpetuated by these systems (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). This approach to civic engagement is beginning to take hold among applied developmental scientists who are encouraging social scientists to question why marginalized groups should be motivated to engage in a system that has excluded them, to examine ways to promote "authentic youth-adult partnerships," to encourage the role of peer-led collective political action, and to promote understanding and awareness of oppression and liberation strategies as an essential element of civic education (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002; Youth Activism Project, 2004). This evolving perspective also calls for longitudinal studies of social disparities in the pathways to civic participation that focus on living in a consistent civic context that provides opportunities for participation in school, after-school, and extracurricular activities; adult modeling of civic behaviors and inclusive attitudes; recognition of historical and current forms of oppression and liberation strategies as they relate to the demographic features of each community; and volunteer and community service (Lichter, Shanahan, & Gardner, 2002; Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008).

CONCLUSION: APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE AND THE PROMOTION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL WELL-BEING

Applied developmental science has entered the 21st century with a foundation of scientific knowledge and emerging theories and methods ripe with opportunity for enhancing the socio-political well-being of individuals across the lifespan. It has drawn much needed empirical and policy attention to the reciprocal influences of institutional, social, family, and individual differences on development (Aber, Brown, Jones, Berg, & Torrente, 2011; Benson, 2003a, 2003b; Cicchetti & Toth, 2009; Greenberg, 2010; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Schwartz, Pantin, Coatsworth, & Szapocnik, 2007; Witherspoon et al., 2009). It has collaborated with communities and institutions to construct methods for understanding and promoting multi-level and bidirectional prevention programs.

Amidst these successes, small effect sizes and sub-optimal long-term outcomes are building recognition that developmental interventions and social policies directed toward individual and group welfare will only succeed if they incorporate the realities of critical variation in structural and systemic socio-political vulnerability. In applying developmental science to the study and alleviation of developmental harms caused by structural injustices, ADS is at the leading edge of creating empirically based interventions that promotes a just civil society that nurtures socio-political well-being.

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