

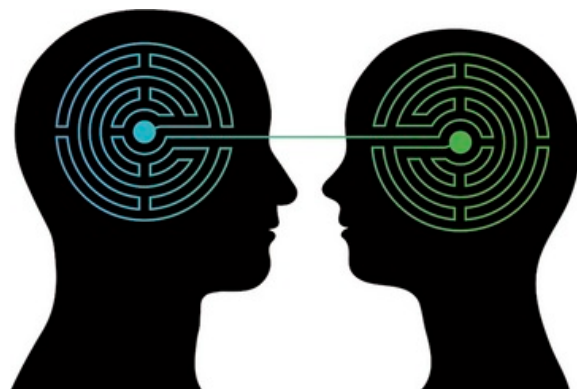
Youth Extremism Series, Paper 5: Fostering Empathy in Youth through Participatory Research and Evaluation

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Introduction

A key driver and enabler for youth extremist behavior is the dehumanization of people. Focusing on the development of empathy in young people can challenge this tendency by equipping youth with skills and dispositions to both feel another's emotional state and consider their mental point of view. One way in which to increase empathy youth have for others is to invite them to participate actively in research and evaluation.

In participatory evaluations, stakeholders are actively engaged throughout the evaluation process, forming evaluative questions, collecting data, analyzing data, and interpreting results. In



participatory research, the same thing occurs—community participants engage in all aspects of the research process, often with the aim of social change. Through the process of working on research or evaluation projects, youth can learn both emotional empathy (feeling what another feels) and cognitive empathy (being able to take another's perspective on a topic). Research and evaluation involve the same types of activities, the only difference is research occurs on a new topic that has yet to be explored, while evaluation occurs in the context of a program in which youth participate.

Utilizing youth participatory evaluation and research can have benefits to youth, their organizations, and their communities (Flores, 2008; Lau 2003; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; London, Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). A unique benefit of youth-led research and evaluation is a form of engagement with low overhead costs or organization. Since youth lead the process of exploration, discovery, and analysis, it is less burdensome than other forms of programming for young people. It can also be incorporated within existing youth programs. Therefore, as we examine ways to expand empathy among youth, it is strategic to consider how the assessment of our existing efforts can be leveraged in ways to continue fostering this development.

Empathy has been conceived of and measured in different ways. Empathy can be understood as having both a cognitive component (mental comprehension of another's perspective or emotional state) as well as an emotional component (feeling what another is feeling emotionally). Specifically, youth-led research and evaluation invites

Preventing Extremism & Developing Workforce Skills

Empathy is not only a way to hinder the development of extremist behavior. It is also a needed work place skill. The InnovATE project has conducted [interviews, focus groups and needs assessments](#) related to agricultural education and training in 12 developing countries. Employers consistently say from country to country that soft skills, including empathy, are needed in addition to technical skills. For example, in [interviews of 21 agribusiness employers in Uganda](#), interviewees said, "They actively sought graduates who could listen carefully and relate well to clients, analyze situations, think creatively about the issues, propose effective solutions, and communicate them well. All reported great difficulty in finding and recruiting such individuals." (InnovATE, 2013, p.4).

youth and adults to critically reflect about their experiences in a program, and to explore ways in which individuals experience the same program differently. It invites both youth and adults to discuss, formulate, research, and interpret results about their program in groups and therefore they must engage in dialogue, disagreement, confusion, and resolution of disagreements. Adults practice listening to youth and youth practice listening to adults. Also, the analysis and interpretation of data can be a way to visually see and experience the diversity of experience that takes place among participants in the same program.

In summary, youth-led research and evaluation outcomes include things such as building trust among groups and fostering discussions about experiences in a program, which could increase emotional empathy. It also involves measuring and capturing these experiences and interpreting results and presenting findings in ways that are most appropriate for the audience, which could increase cognitive empathy. Table 1 summarizes how youth-led research and evaluation activities can be linked to empathy development.

Research and/or Evaluation Activity	Possible participatory activities	Mechanism to Empathy
Question creation and prioritization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Round table discussions about prioritization of evaluation questions • Artistic or creative skits about what it's like to be a participant in the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open discussion where feelings and perspectives are shared • Expressing feelings and perspectives in emotionally salient ways
Methodology choice and instrument design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and discussion on how to create surveys and conduct focus groups and interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion about preferences and reasons for choosing one method over another • Articulation of rationale and perspective for choosing certain methods
Logistical planning and carrying out data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating committees and teams to carry out various aspects of the data collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in a team and compromising
Analysis and interpretation of results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth analysis survey and interview data • Evaluator working with staff and youth to interpret results and discuss reactions to findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing the divergence of feelings and perspectives to the same program • Hearing others' firsthand accounts of experiences with the program • Using interpretation of data results as a way to understand the perspectives of others
Use of results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth, adults, and evaluator create presentations, fact sheets, or host meetings to share results with community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking on the perspective of the audience for which the presentation or results will be given

Table 1: Youth-led Research and Evaluation Activities and Connection to Empathy Development

Solutions and Good Practices

There has been an upsurge in empathy-related curricula, programs, and projects with the overall goal of increasing youth's empathic thoughts, feelings, and actions. Empathy is often measured as a psychological trait which displays relative stability in an individual. However, given that it is so closely tied to relationships with others, programs that have tried to foster empathy through interpersonal interactions have shown initial successes (Schonert-Reichl et al, 2012). Successful examples of youth empathy programs include projects such as [Ashoka's school-based empathy toolkit](#) and the [Roots of Empathy program](#), which encourages empathy in school-aged children through regular classroom visits by an infant and parent in the community. When youth development and community development are perceived in tandem, efforts to promote empathy in youth also promote good community outcomes. In this way, active social empathy among youth requires interacting with and serving others around them.

Youth Led Research and Empathy Development

Youth as Researchers (YAR) is a program of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre developed originally by researchers at The National University of Ireland, Galway. The YAR program enables and trains youth to conduct research in their own communities. YAR was most recently implemented in Philadelphia where the Youth Researchers chose to examine racial bias in policing in their neighborhood. A result of the interactions between the youth researchers and the police officers was the development of empathy between the two groups. As the officers arrived one by one it was obvious that everyone involved was a little bit nervous. However, by the end of the interviews the officers and youth researchers were hugging and taking pictures together. Several officers asked about volunteering with the program and the researchers talked about understanding the officers as individuals rather than simply a stereotype. This study is still in progress but initial observations point to the fact that YAR is an effective means of facilitating empathy as well as building agency in participants. These qualities can help individuals, who may otherwise be susceptible to violent extremist messages, to be resilient and choose other means of empowerment.



"How can I volunteer with this program?"
Officer Oliveras

Conclusion

As empathy is further cultivated among youth, it can act as the catalyst for increased understanding and interconnectedness, limiting the devastating effects of conflict, and leading to positive social development, capacity building and stable, peaceful social conditions on a local and global scale. Empathy education can be a tool to both foster civic and social behavior among youth and to encourage youth to reflect upon their current civic and social behavior.

Recommendations

- 1) **Youth-led research and evaluation should be more seriously considered for common practice in the evaluation of youth programming, particularly programs which focus on empathy development.** Youth-led research and evaluation has the potential to help bring new topics and new forms of data to light and inform more relevant youth programming.
- 2) **Use existing organizational structures and activities to infuse empathy education.** Any program that focuses on involving youth in discussions with others, sharing opinions, and summarizing or reflecting on the opinions of others can increase empathy.
- 3) **Youth-led research and evaluation has an ability to foster empathy among youth and strengthen relationships among youth with their organizations and community.** This has benefits which further strengthen the goals of much youth programs while also providing evaluative findings on the efficacy of youth programming.
- 4) **Those involved in developing youth programming and carrying out evaluations of this programming should consider structuring activities in participatory ways to capture the potential empathy-related and relational benefits of participatory research and evaluation.** Practitioners and programming specialists interested in empathy development as a specific goal may do well to explore supporting or requiring youth program evaluations to be done in a participatory way.
- 5) **Consider empathy as a two-way street.** While increasing empathy in youth for others is critical, so is increasing empathy for adults towards youth. Adult modeling of empathetic behaviors and understanding can be a powerful tool to increase the trust and acceptance of youth towards working with adults as partners on community projects.
- 6) **Consider research that elicits youth's perspectives about what empathy is, what it means, and how it is expressed** in order to more specifically target and identify how youth express empathy towards others.

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