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## Exploring Group Dynamics in Activity-Based Group Work with Young People Experiencing Homelessness

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of group dynamics in an activity-based group comprising four young people experiencing homelessness and one group facilitator. Over the course of 12 sessions, the group produced a coconstructed audio documentary. Nine group sessions were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for patterns of group dynamics, including communication and interaction patterns, cohesion, social integration and influence, and culture. Findings suggest that the task-oriented nature of coproducing the audio documentary facilitated the development of interpersonal dynamics, provided young people with opportunities for personal growth, and provided them with opportunities to engage their strengths as well.

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### Introduction

In 2013 an estimated 550,000 unaccompanied young people experienced an episode of homelessness of one week or more in the United States (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2014). In the same year, an estimated 12,186 unaccompanied young people experienced an episode of homelessness in Chicago, totaling 8.8% of the city's homeless population (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2015). With ongoing regional, statewide, and national cuts to programming for young people experiencing homelessness (Housing Action Illinois, 2015), there are not nearly enough services, including shelter beds, for these vulnerable young people. Due to the low availability of beds, many young people frequently move from shelters to friends' homes to sleeping on the street, thus complicating tracking of and/or research with this population (Congressional Research Service, 2013; Sommer, 2001).

The majority of youth homelessness research focuses on reporting the risks that lead young people to experience homelessness, including a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer sexual orientation and/or a trans or queer gender identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012a, 2012b), family conflict (Alvi, Scott, & Stanyon, 2010), and trauma (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr,

2010), and the consequences they encounter as a result of experiencing homelessness, including exposure to substance use (Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010; Ferguson & Xie, 2012), sexually transmitted diseases (Kennedy, Tucker, Green, Golinelli, & Ewing, 2012; Ober, Martino, Ewing, & Tucker, 2012), and mental illness (Beharry, 2012; Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012). Countering this risk and consequence-oriented narrative is a small but growing body of literature examining the talents, strengths, and interests of young people experiencing homelessness (Kelly, 2015; Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson, 2010; Kidd, 2012; Kidd & Evans, 2011). Although the fields of strengths-based research and practice with young people experiencing homelessness are expanding, few studies have explored the use of activity-based group work practice with the population and its potential to engage their strengths.

Group workers have a long history of using recreational, art, and music-based activities in their practice, dating back to the settlement house and recreation movements of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Addams, 1909a, 1909b; Meyer, 1934; Pangburn, 1925). Several group work scholars have emphasized the importance of these kinds of activities (Andrews, 2001; Breton, 1990; Konopka, 1963; Malekoff, 2014; Middleman, 1981) and their effectiveness in working with young people (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2004; Ezell & Levy, 2003; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012; Tyson & Baffour, 2004). Few researchers have explored the use of art-based activities with young people experiencing homelessness (Finley, 2000; Finley & Finely, 1999), and even fewer studies have explored the use of music-based activities with young people experiencing homelessness (Kelly, 2015).

Based on this gap in the literature, the first author developed an ethnographic study that explored a music studio in a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness as a potential site for strengths-based social work practice. The study focused on the following research questions: (1) what processes are involved in promoting and developing a music studio in a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness, (2) what are young people's experiences while engaging in the music studio, and (3) what meanings do young people attach to their experiences? In addition to traditional ethnographic data collection techniques, the first author invited a group of young people he observed and interviewed to develop a coconstructed audio documentary that aurally explored their experiences in the music studio and the meanings they attached to their experiences.

Several social work with groups practitioners and researchers have noted the benefits of activity-based groups for young people, including the use of theatre in urban youths' positive development and decision making (Dutton, 2001) as well as the use of Earn-A-Bike programs in assisting young people

with intra- and interpersonal skill development (Kinnevy, Healey, Pollio, & North, 1999). Findings from these studies, as well as Coyne's (1989) theoretical work, suggest that activity-based groups serve a dual purpose for young people by providing them with opportunities to collaboratively work toward a common goal and in doing so experience interpersonal group dynamics.

Few social work with groups scholars have assessed the interpersonal dynamics of activity-based groups for young people. Given this gap in the literature, it is important to explore the development of interpersonal dynamics in activity-based groups and whether young people experience personal growth as a result of their participation. Although the task-oriented output of the coconstructed audio documentary group has been described elsewhere (see Kelly, 2015), the process-oriented elements of the group's work have yet to be examined. The purpose of this article is to explore the interpersonal dynamics of the small group's process in the collaborative construction of an audio documentary. In doing so, we argue that the task-based activity facilitated the development of interpersonal group dynamics, offered young people important opportunities for personal growth, and ultimately engaged members' strengths.

## Group dynamics

There is a rich body of literature treating the topic of small group dynamics in the social sciences, including social psychology (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). For the purposes of this study we employ a social work with groups perspective, specifically the model presented by Toseland and Rivas (2012). We have chosen their model as an organizational template for presenting our data, given its rootedness in theoretical conceptions unique to the social work discipline, such as the strengths perspective and person-in-environment theory.

Building on the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century group work practitioners and scholars (see Coyle, 1930, 1937; Elliot, 1928; Forsyth, 2010; Northen, 1969), Toseland and Rivas (2012) identify four dimensions of group dynamics: (1) communication and interaction patterns, (2) cohesion, (3) social integration and influence, and (4) group culture. Groups and their members have unique patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication and interaction patterns. Although group-centered communication and interaction patterns tend to increase members' commitment to group goals and the group's decision-making process, leader-centered communication and interaction patterns are typically more efficient in reducing the amount of time the group spends off-task. Additional influential elements of group communication and interaction patterns include members' positive and/or negative emotional bonds and members' power and status within the group. These elements develop and change over the life span of the group and influence group cohesion.

Forsyth (2010) attributes three interrelated components to group cohesion: (1) members' attraction to each other and the group, (2) their sense of unity and ability to envision the group as a single, unified entity, and (3) members' sense of teamwork that allows the group to function as a coordinated whole. In groups with higher levels of cohesion, members' attraction to the group often manifests in increased attendance, participation, and progress toward individual and group goals. Members tend to display increased confidence in each other's ability to perform tasks, and this confidence then positively affects members' actual task performance. Conversely, groups with lower levels of cohesion often fail to meet members' needs for affiliation, which often results in decreased commitment, participation, and attendance. Members' social integration and influence within the group play an important part in the development and maintenance of a cohesive group.

Social integration and influence refer to the ways in which members fit within the group and how they and other members accept this fit (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). Group norms, member roles, and their status within the group play an important part in this dynamic, developmental process. Norms represent the shared beliefs and expectations about what behaviors are acceptable for the group and what are not. Workers initially shape norms through group guidelines, rules, and contracts. Over time norms tend to develop through the continued interactions of group members under the guidance of the worker. Although norms guide behavior across a spectrum of activities and situations within the group, roles focus on the anticipated behavior of members in relation to a certain function within the group. Members' status plays an equally important part in this process as members' exercise and experience their position and power within the group. As group norms, member roles, and their status develop, they contribute to and are influenced by group culture.

Toseland and Rivas (2012) define *group culture* as the "values, beliefs, customs, and traditions held in common by group members" (p. 87, citing Olmstead, 1959). Homogenous group membership, which may include shared life experiences, goals, and purpose, will often expedite the emergence of a group culture. Conversely, heterogeneous group membership, which may include diverse life experiences, regardless of shared goals and purpose, will experience a slower development of group culture. Strong and cemented group culture brings together those members who share and believe in it and tends to isolate those who feel outside of the dominant values of the group.

When considering group dynamics, it is important to conceptualize their development in tandem with stages of group development. For example, leader-centered interaction patterns are often more common at the beginning stage of a group and eventually progress to more group-centered interaction patterns as the group evolves into the middle and end phases (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). Framing interpersonal group dynamics through a stages-of-

group-development lens enriches our understanding of these dynamics and provides workers with important cues as to when to look for specific interpersonal dynamics. For the purposes of this study, interpersonal group dynamics provided a theoretical lens and a priori, theory-driven codes, which were employed in analyzing several hours of field recordings documenting the development and production of the coconstructed audio documentary. In doing so we sought to identify the development of group dynamics in an activity-based group that offered young people opportunities for personal growth and engaged their strengths.

## Method

### *Production of the audio documentary*

The coconstructed audio documentary group convened at a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness, Teen Living Programs (TLP) Belfort House, which is located in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, Illinois. As a part of their supportive services and recreational programming, the agency built an in-house music studio for youth residents to explore their audio-related talents and interests. Selection and sampling for the coconstructed audio documentary group evolved out of the procedures used in the larger ethnographic study, where all English speaking young people who engaged in the music studio were eligible to participate, with *engagement* operationally defined as young people who worked on music production and/or supported the music production process in the studio. The coconstructed audio documentary group continued the use of nonprobability purposive and homogenous sampling strategies with an intensified focus. Miles and Huberman (1994) define *intensity sampling* as a strategy that purposefully selects “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (p. 28). An intensity sampling strategy was selected for the coconstructed audio documentary group to recruit those young people who were most engaged with the music studio.

Following the completion of participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews for the larger ethnographic study, the first author invited those young people most involved with the studio to participate in the coconstructed audio documentary group. The four young people ( $n = 4$ , three young men and one young woman) asked to participate in the project agreed. None of the young people invited to participate in the project declined. Once consented, the young people and the first author met to develop a plan that provided an initial outline of the group’s work, including defining the purpose of the group (i.e., to produce a coconstructed audio documentary), the methods for producing the audio documentary (i.e.,

independent field recording and incorporation of young people's original productions), and a description of the tasks to be accomplished during weekly meetings (see Kelly, 2015 for a more detailed description of the coconstructed process). The group met for 12 sessions over the spring and summer of 2012 and successfully produced a coconstructed audio documentary that explored young people's experiences in the music studio and the meaning they attach to their experiences. In terms of compensation, young people were paid \$10 a session and invited to keep the digital field recorders used during the production process. All study procedures complied with the Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

### ***Analysis of group dynamics***

Nine of the 12 sessions were recorded by the first author and later transcribed by the second author. Session recordings were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible to prioritize members' language and voice. Following transcription, both authors conducted quality checks of the data by randomly selecting two 10-minute sections from each transcript. Quality checks produced few transcription errors across the data set. Following quality checks, we collaboratively developed a codebook. Boyatzis' (1989) continuum of theory-driven, prior-research-driven, and data-driven thematic code development provided a useful framework for conceptualizing and building the codebook. Theory-driven codes are derived from the theoretical perspectives guiding the research, "the hypothesis or elements of the theory," and are used to identify "signals, or indicators, of evidence that would support this theory" (Boyatzis, 1989, p. 33), within the data set. Prior-research-driven codes are generated from findings of previous research and are used to cluster and/or reconfigure "categories identified or developed by others" (Boyatzis, 1989, p. 37), identified within the data set. Data-driven codes are developed inductively by a close reading and interpretation of the data set.

Given the strong theoretical and empirical foundation supporting the presence and role of interpersonal dynamics in group work, we conceptualized Toseland and Rivas' (2012) model of group dynamics as a combination of theory and prior-research-driven codes. In further defining and developing the codes, we employed DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch's (2011) amended version of Boyatzis's (1989) guide to structuring codes, which includes naming and providing an example of the code. Table 1 demonstrates our developmental process, whereby the group dynamic "social integration and influence" is represented by the codes "roles" and "status." Each code is then defined and situated in the context of the data set through an example.

Following the development of the codebook, we worked collaboratively as a dyad and coded six of the nine transcripts. The remaining three transcripts



**Table 1.** Example of codebook.

Group dynamic	Code	Definition/description	Example
Social integration and influence	Roles	Shared expectations about the functions of group members that continue to emerge and evolve as the work of the group changes over time (Toseland & Rivas, 2012, p. 84)	Explicit and implicit references to members' roles in the development and production of the audio documentary
	Status	Indicators of members' power and status in the group initially and overtime (Toseland & Rivas, 2012, p. 77)	Knowledge and techniques relevant to the completion of the audio documentary, including production, spoken word, and music

were analyzed by the second author and reviewed by the first author. In working closely as a team throughout the analysis, we engaged in a dialogical process to identify moments within the data set that highlighted the development of interpersonal group dynamics throughout the production of the coconstructed audio documentary. When discrepancies arose, we explored the transcripts in greater detail to reach a consensual understanding of the code and the related example. Audit trails of our decision-making process as well the use of two coders lent confirmability and credibility to the data, thereby increasing the trustworthiness and authenticity of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software.

## Findings

The following section presents excerpts from session transcripts that highlight the development of interpersonal group dynamics through the production of the coconstructed audio documentary. Table 2 presents group members and their self-reported demographic information. To fully engage with the findings, we invite readers to listen to the original audio recordings of the session excerpts. Periodic dropouts in the audio were intentionally added to provide confidentiality when young people state each other's names and when they refer to others outside the group. The audio may be streamed at the following URL: <https://soundcloud.com/brianlkelly/sets/group-dynamics/s-e1tv0>

**Table 2.** Group Members' self-reported age, race, and gender<sup>a</sup>.

Young person	Identity
Marcus	19-year-old African American male
Outlaw	20-year-old African American male
Smurf	20-year-old African American female
Theo	18-year-old African American male
Brian (facilitator)	37-year-old White male

a. Group members' names are pseudonyms, except for Brian. Members formally consented to pursuing publication of the findings, which includes recordings of their voice.



### ***Communication and interaction patterns***

This section of dialogue comes from the planning phase of the group. Having previously established a group purpose through a more leader-centered process, the young people began to take ownership of the conversation and process by further specifying the focus of the documentary, conceptualizing how they will produce it, and collaboratively developing research questions to guide their audio-based fieldwork. The section begins with Marcus offering his thoughts on the concept of the audio documentary.

Marcus: We should all tell our own story.

Smurf: To me the studio is a whole different world

Marcus: We all use the studio space, but we all have different meaning of what we use the studio space for, I mean, pretty much, we're trying to come up with like how the audio documentary is going to be about.

Outlaw: It's about how we use the studio space.

Brian: Well it could be, this is what we're doing right now, we're trying to figure out what we wanna do, so go ahead-

Marcus: I mean, this is just a suggestion, I mean—

Brian: That's what we're doing. We're brainstorming.

Marcus: We could all, every time we come in the studio we grab a microphone, headset, and we tell our story of what we're doing in the studio, and like just express, even though it might get a little bit personal, but I mean we're expressing, we let people know this, I mean, how the studio space is—

Outlaw: And have music to go to and everything to go to—

Marcus: Right, just to switch it up, so like it might be like be, one part might be Smurf and then I'm coming in right behind her with my music and I'm telling my part and then Theo coming through and then Outlaw coming through, it just all switch back in different rotations.

Smurf: Right, we shouldn't have it like, consistently with one person doing it, like in the beginning let's say it opens with me and you got me consistently for a while and then another person comes up, it should like—

Marcus: Chop shop.

Smurf: Yeah, it should like say, say it started with me for a minute and then Outlaw and then Theo and then Marcus and then probably go back to Outlaw, but

it's still telling a story instead of having one person going for this amount of time...

(Marcus, Outlaw, and Theo murmur in agreement with Smurf and continue to discuss how they conceptualize the audio documentary. We rejoin the conversation after Brian prompts the group to consider and discuss what questions they want explore in the audio documentary.)

Marcus: I'd say, like, we can start asking ourselves like, what does the studio space mean to us?

Theo: Like what emotions—

Marcus: Like what emotions go through your head or go through you when you in the studio space, or just period, or just in general.

Brian: I'm writing these down, so bear with me. Ok so I have, "What does the studio space mean to you?" Or me, I guess would be. "What does the studio space mean to me?" "What emotions go through my mind" or "what emotions go through me while I'm in the studio space?"

Theo: What are some challenges?

Brian: Around, production or ... ?

Smurf: Yeah.

Brian: Just the space in general?

Smurf: Because it's hard coming up, I mean it's not hard coming up with a poem or a beat, but it take a minute.

Marcus (overlapping): Just with the space in general.

As the young people refine the focus of the documentary and the story they wish it to tell, their communication and interaction patterns become more group centered, whereby members rely less on Brian to facilitate and guide the process. When Marcus suggests that members tell their stories of the studio, Smurf, Outlaw, and Theo agree. From this congruent space, together they develop the questions that ultimately frame the documentary. As the young people communicate spontaneously with each other, Brian invites members to continue brainstorming as he scribes the group's work. In this section we see how group-centered communication and interaction patterns allowed the group to move closer toward its goal of producing a coconstructed audio documentary. In addition, as young people communicate and interact with each other around a common shared purpose, a natural sense of cohesion develops and is tangible within the group.

## Cohesion

After several weeks of recording and mixing, the agency's clinical director dropped in and the young people invited her to listen to a working edit of the audio documentary. Following playback, she offered the young people positive feedback and tearfully expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to hear their work and witness their growth. Prior to exiting the studio, she shared that hearing the audio documentary reminded her of why she works with young people and continues to support the studio as a vital service within the agency. The section begins with young people's reactions to her powerful response.

Smurf: She was gonna bust out crying—

Theo: That made me feel—

Smurf: I know, right especially when she started crying—

Outlaw: Especially when we get it done, the levels and everything—

Smurf: That's what we really gotta, the levels is what we really gotta tighten up on—

Brian: So I mean here's, I was getting choked up too, I mean, we just kicked some serious ass.

(Laughter)

Brian: I just was like, cause it's coming together and then you listen to it and it's like oh, it's cohesive, it's so many different pieces and it totally like works.

Smurf: I just almost cried looking at her cry.

Theo: Then when you listen to the whole thing, you get a real concept of just how much this means to every person—

Outlaw: That's involved—

Theo: That's involved—

Outlaw: Yeah, exactly like we do it.

Theo: It's not just a music studio, this is how some people stay sane.

Brian: Yes.

Outlaw: Exactly.

Smurf: I said that in one of my recordings, I swear to God I did. Because it keeps me sane.

Outlaw: I remember like, I was talking to (staff member's name) like, my first time when I was in TLP and he was like "when I first was coming like I made music and you know be rapping and like I like writing songs too" and he was like, I was telling him I was going through something and he was like just you being able to be artistic and like creative, that's freedom right there, that's freedom because you can go anywhere and do whatever like at any moment, that's a lot of freedom like, to be able to create stuff and you always there to create and you know.

Brian: Yeah, you can step out.

Outlaw: Yeah.

Brian: Yeah, it's beautiful.

The above excerpt highlights the bond between the young people, their shared reverence and respect for the studio, their enthusiasm for the audio documentary project, and the overall cohesion of the group. Sharing their work with a third party served as a catalyst for the group to realize and revel in their accomplishment, and to look to this accomplishment as “shared” between the group members. Although each member brought his or her individual strengths and talents to the project, the final result is a shared achievement. This realization then served to strengthen the group's bond further, creating higher levels of cohesion among the members.

### ***Social integration and influence***

Although the group experienced cohesion, members also experienced conflict and tension as they navigated the task of developing and producing the audio documentary. The following exchange took place during the last session as Outlaw and Theo put the finishing touches on the final product, which is also known as mastering. After being absent for several sessions, Marcus learns that though his music is included in the audio documentary, his voice is absent as he has not recorded responses to the previously developed questions. The conversation begins as Marcus leaves the room to record his responses and Brian, Outlaw, and Theo discuss how to proceed.

Outlaw: I tell you we don't even need to put nothing else to it. Yeah but we never even brought that up, it's already been brought up but what we going to really, I feel like the documentary, the way we got it—

Theo: Cause like if he had came in and made it in like the last session then—

Outlaw: Or something but we already did it, we're just doing levels we already go over levels bro—

Theo: It's true.

Outlaw: It's already been did, today not for messing, we already here and we going back and just mastering it you feel me, you feel me?

Brian: Yeah.

Outlaw: That's just mastering.

Brian: So what do you guys want to do?

Outlaw: We don't need the piece or nothing.

Brian: Theo?

Outlaw: Like you said we did it we could be the last session man.

- Theo: Right, and that's the thing it's like last week, it's like, trying to put it all together and basically start all over 'cause if you want to put it way back like in the middle then I have to re-do everything.
- Brian: No, no, no, we're not, this is literally just like do we want to give Marcus a chance to respond to this question?
- Outlaw: No, no. I mean we don't need, we already done. I'm not even trying to be bogus bro.
- Theo: I mean like, I feel where Outlaw is coming from, it's like this was just you know to listen, make sure we get the sounds right, not adding stuff at the end.
- Outlaw: I got that feeling when we did it last time like yeah, this is it, like—
- Theo: It was—
- Outlaw: And the tracks everything it was on point, on point on point now it's like—yeah but it's been plenty of time, we've been working on this for weeks and you gave us our own recorders-
- Brian: I know I know.
- Theo: If he would have, even if he would have brought it up like "Yeah I wanna add this this this and that," I would have been like okay, cool.

The above exchange demonstrates some of the social integration and influence patterns in the group. Through this decision-making process, Outlaw and Theo demonstrate their power and status in the group. As members who regularly attended the sessions and contributed to the group's process and product (e.g., recording their responses), they argued that it was too late to incorporate Marcus' work. In doing so, they exercise their power and status within the group as members who can make important production decisions that affect other members' contributions to the final product. Ultimately, Brian, Outlaw, and Theo explained to Marcus that given that this was the last session, they were unable, and perhaps unwilling, to incorporate his responses.

In addition, throughout the decision making process Outlaw, Theo, and Brian demonstrate some of the roles they played throughout the life of the group. Outlaw emerges as a group motivator and visionary by keeping members focused on the goal of a coherent final product and not getting bogged down by the addition of new content. Theo emerges as an engineering and technical expert of the group, which he demonstrates by sharing his concerns of adding new content and the additional workload that it will create for him. Outlaw and Theo further demonstrate these roles by making an argument that the addition of new content will alter what they perceive to be a close to complete final product. Finally, we see Brian navigating his role as facilitator in this section as he attempts to include Marcus while still respecting Theo and Outlaw's desire to stay on schedule with production.

## Group culture

The following excerpt captures Outlaw, Smurf, Theo, and Brian sharing a meal and some conversation as they take a break from editing and mixing the documentary. The exchange begins as the young people discuss diversity and segregation and quickly moves into their experiences as young people of color in the city.

- Theo: It's funny how we're like the most diverse city in the country—  
 Smurf: But the most segregated—  
 Theo: But we're one of the most—  
 Brian: I think we're the most, I really think we're the most—  
 Outlaw: It is boy you go to like one part in Chicago you be like, "Damn, they racist as hell over here," then you go over here they be—  
 Theo: Cool—  
 Outlaw: They'll be cool in public, but when they get out of there, boy—  
 Smurf: I got off the train one day with this lady, I wasn't even paying this lady no attention. I'm just walking and I'm walking and it's only both of us on the street so she's walking and she just starts speeding up, so I'm like "What?"  
 Theo: You gotta pee?  
 (Laughter)  
 Smurf: I'm like, "OK." So I'm walking and I'm trying to get to (friend's name) because I was going to his thing that day so I'm already late so I'm trying to rush, so I'm walking and she see me walk up on the side, she's walking, this lady, I didn't even get this close to her, this lady took off running down the street—  
 Outlaw: You witness that every day. You could have two seats open by us on the train and—  
 Smurf: And they will not sit—  
 Outlaw: They will not sit by us—  
 Theo: Even the only two seats left, they will stand up—  
 Outlaw: It's so obvious. We just be like "Dang I would have down there if you was right there," like—  
 Theo: I got no problems with you—  
 Outlaw: Or if they're with their girlfriends, they're gonna pull them all the way over here to this side like, there's a seat right here friend, she could have sat right here.  
 Theo: I kid you not, what day was this, Saturday, Saturday I was going out west to that HIV thing, right. I come back, this dude, I'm on the—  
 Brian: Green line?  
 Theo: No, I was on the blue line—  
 Smurf: Yup.

Theo: I kid you not, this dude checked his pockets, he was getting ready to get off, he checked his pockets three times before he walked off the train. I was like “Damn bro, for real,” he wasn’t checking it because he had a book in his back pocket, but he was checking it because he had cargo shorts, he checking all his pockets like “OK, make sure I got everything,” then he walked off—

Outlaw: Yeah dude.

Theo: He never let his girlfriend hand go, he was like hold on. Like, dang bro!

The above conversation is one of several that occurred throughout the life of the group that focused on young people’s shared experiences, including their experiences related to the task of the group (i.e., exploring what the studio means to them through the production of a coconstructed audio documentary) and their experiences of oppression and social marginalization as young people of color in the city. In both instances, their capacity to bond was influenced by the shared goal and purpose of the group as well as their shared life experiences. This bond aided and influenced the development of a group-centered, cohesive group culture. Their shared reverence and respect for the studio as well as their experiences as young people of color who have experienced homelessness, discrimination, and racism shaped the culture of the group, always working in tandem to influence how the young people interacted with one another.

## Discussion

The coconstructed audio documentary group and the task-based activities it entailed provided young people with opportunities to collaboratively work toward a common goal and experience interpersonal group dynamics. During the early sessions of the group, discussions surrounding the focus of the documentary, the production methods they would use, and the specific ideas and concepts they wanted to explore in their audio-based fieldwork fostered group-centered communication and interaction patterns among the young people. As members collaboratively worked through these tasks and communicated directly with each other in developing their ideas and solutions, they took increasing ownership of the group. In doing so, they built a foundation of cohesion that grew as the group progressed through the production process and completed related tasks, including conducting independent fieldwork and compiling and producing the final product. This cohesion was also evident when members discussed the audio documentary with staff as they dropped in the studio. In these moments, when young members shared their work, it was most evident that they were connected and working toward a greater goal—the completion of the audio documentary.



As members worked toward that goal, patterns of social integration and influence emerged. Young people demonstrated varying levels of power and status within the group. As is evident in the Findings section, regular attendance of the sessions as well as the completion of field-recording tasks lent Outlaw and Theo the power and status within the group to make the final determination as to whether Marcus's responses would be included in the final version of the audio documentary. In addition, all the members, including Brian, demonstrated unique roles throughout the production process—roles that emerged directly from the tasks related to the production of the audio documentary. As with many groups, conversations digressed throughout the sessions and young people discussed their experiences and interests. These conversations often focused on their love of music and the studio space, as well their experiences of discrimination and oppression as young people of color. Member homogeneity around these experiences and interests led to a deeper bond among the young people, something above and beyond the completion of tasks related to the production of an audio documentary. This homogeneity expedited the development of a group culture that supported the young people as they completed the audio documentary, allowing them to complete tasks and share important life experiences with one another.

The coconstructed audio documentary group offered young people opportunities for personal growth. Group-centered communication and interactions patterns during the planning phase of the project allowed young people to experience the benefits of participating in a collaborative process that valued their input and voice. Young people brought their individual talents and skills to the project and through a collaborative process created a final product that considers and presents their individual talents and skills as well as the group's collective talents and skills. When members shared the audio documentary with others, they often received validation for their efforts, which bolstered their confidence and perseverance to complete the project. In addition, the ability to carry a task through to its fruition proved a rewarding experience for the young people, evidenced by their pride in sharing it with staff members. The shared accountability to the project and to fellow group members, which was strengthened by a strong sense of group culture and cohesion, helped the young people to engage fully in the project and in doing so, experience personal growth.

Ultimately, the coconstructed audio documentary group engaged young people's strengths. The young African American members who have experienced homelessness are often defined as socially marginalized. Their strengths are rarely acknowledged let alone validated. Through this group process, the young people activated their love of music and reverence for the music studio into a project where their passion was understood, supported, and affirmed by others. Coconstructing the audio documentary allowed the

young people to engage their technical strengths in audio production as well as their expressive and verbal skills. The group became a space that celebrated their strengths, rather than focusing on their deficits or the problems in their lives that needed fixing. This celebratory spirit is evident in the data that emerged from the group process in the form of the audio documentary itself; the group fostered the strengths of its members, and this affirming process ultimately produced an equally affirming product.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to our findings. Deductive theory and data-driven coding may have introduced bias into the analysis. Although deductive coding may be “more sensitive to projection on the part of the researcher” (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch, 2011), cocoding and the creation of audit trails increased the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings. Small sample size and specificity of the research site limits the generalizability of the findings to other groups with similar purpose and member characteristics. Finally, additional research is needed to explore what elements, factors, and processes of the coconstructed audio group led young people to experience the most beneficial dynamics and how those dynamics may contribute to young people’s personal development and engagement of their strengths.

### **Implications**

This study has implications for social work with groups practice, research, and education. It expands social work with groups practice by exploring the development of interpersonal group dynamics in activity-based, task-oriented groups for young people experiencing homelessness. These groups provide young people with valuable opportunities for personal growth as well as opportunities to acknowledge, celebrate, and hone their strengths. In addition they offer young members opportunities to work collaboratively and form bonds with other young people that share similar life experiences, including experiences of oppression and marginalization. In terms of research, findings from this study challenge the predominant risks and consequences narrative in homeless youth research and add to the literature focused on young people experiencing homelessness strengths. This study expands that body by exploring the potential for activity-based, task-oriented groups to assist young people in their personal growth and engage their strengths. Finally, this study provides social work with groups educators and students a compelling, strengths-based case study that focuses on the development of interpersonal group dynamics in activity-based, task-oriented groups with young people experiencing homelessness.

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