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Generosity: Building Circles of Respect

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Youth disconnected from adults often gravitate to negative peer cultures and engage in high-risk behavior. This article introduces Positive Peer Culture (PPC), a strength-based program to enlist youth in helping one another and building respectful bonds with adults.² This model is grounded in Circle of Courage needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. Research shows that strengthening generosity is essential to developing resilience and prosocial relationships.

Tim: A Disconnected Youth

During doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, I was a youth care worker at Hawthorn Center, then considered among the foremost residential group treatment centers in the United States. One evening after completing my shift in a cottage of teen boys, I went to another residence to join a colleague for our carpool to Ann Arbor. As I entered this facility, fourteen-year-old Tim was screaming in rage, hurling furniture from his room into the hallway.

This was an escalation of an earlier melee with a wild group of peers where Tim had been wielding a pool cue as a weapon. The young “doctor on call,” still in his residency, was summoned. Borrowing a tactic from adult mental hospitals, he told child care staff to rush Tim with a mattress and pin him down to be sedated by injection. The dosage was obviously insufficient as it further unleashed Tim’s rage.

I watched as three co-workers dodged flying furniture and grabbed Tim, dragging him into the locked seclusion room. But before they could exit, Tim slipped halfway out the door just as it was slammed on his body. As Tim screamed profanities, the staff then shoved him under the metal bed frame bolted to the floor of the seclusion room and made their quick escape. Our carpool departure was delayed as I waited while the workers logged their sanitized versions of this crisis.

After a few minutes, I went to check on Tim, peering through the small window in the door of the “quiet room” as it was called. The mattress had been shredded to strips of cloth, and Tim was not in sight. I used my master key and pulled the door open, finding Tim hanging himself from the doorknob in a seated position. I quickly unwrapped the cloth from around his neck; he was still conscious, now sputtering profanity at me for not letting him die.

The nurse on duty administered another injection and Tim was finally fully sedated, soon asleep on the tattered mattress. She wanted someone to work overtime and watch Tim through the night, and I volunteered. For the next eight hours, I pondered how staff had failed to meet the needs of this boy in pain, who, cut off from human kindness, had tried to end his life.

Reflecting on Tim, I wrote an article on “Roadblocks to Therapeutic Management.” These included a negative subculture of peers, a staff climate not attuned to the best interests of the child,

and coercive behavior management methods. I mailed my ideas to the Director of Nursing who returned my paper saying, “This is very perceptive, but child care staff shouldn’t be concerned with such matters.” My musings became a chapter in *The Other 23 Hours* published a half-century ago by Albert Trieschman, James Whittaker, and Larry Brendtro (1969). The title was a rejoinder to *The Fifty Minute Hour* by psychoanalyst Robert Lindner (1955) who is best known for writing *Rebel without a Cause*. Our premise is that the relationships in the natural life space have the most powerful impact on shaping individual growth and dynamics.

We three co-authors of *The Other 23 Hours* first met as faculty at the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp which prepared professionals to work with kids like Tim—Redl and Wineman (1951) called them *Children Who Hate*. The goal of this therapeutic camp was clear but challenging: *Connecting with Kids in Conflict* (Morse, 2008). Staff at Hawthorn Center had not created positive bonds with Tim who had been diagnosed as *relatively affectionless*, a sanitized way of saying he was a budding psychopath.³ A better descriptor was *affection hunger* as David Levy observed in 1937. My doctoral research focused on such relationship-wary youth in Michigan residential group care settings.

Relationships in the natural life space have the most powerful impact on shaping individual growth and dynamics.

Upon joining the faculty at the University of Illinois as a professor in the field of Children’s Behavior Disorders, I discovered that a preponderance of my colleagues were behaviorists who dismissed the notion of “relationship” as unscientific. In order to communicate in their language, relationships were defined in social learning terms of social reinforcement, modeling, and communication. This became the chapter “Relationship Beachheads” in *The Other 23 Hours*.

We had the opportunity to put these concepts of relational care in practice during 14 years at Starr Commonwealth in Michigan—which had been the primary site of my doctoral research. With high truancy, a delinquent underground, and constant staff turnover, it soon became apparent that the biggest challenge was to turn around negative peer subcultures. This led to a collaboration with Harry Vorrath where we implemented the Positive

Peer Culture model (Brendtro & Ness, 1983; Vorath & Brendtro, 1974, 1985). PPC is now listed as a highly rated research-based practice by the California Evidence-Based Clearing House (CEBC) which provides this description: “PPC is a peer-helping model designed to improve social competence and cultivate strengths in youth. Care and concern for others is the defining element of PPC.” The following discussion highlights this peer-helping approach.

Circles of Respect

At a recent conference in Germany, we met youth who were alive with purpose and hope. These teens led a workshop session where they described the core values they had chosen to guide their relationships with peers and adults:

We treat each other with respect!

We look out for one another!

We help others if they have problems!

We reject all physical or psychological violence!

Their values clearly challenged the self-centered mindset of contemporary culture. These young people were espousing democratic principles for treating all persons with dignity. Most of the youth were immigrants to Germany. Their own personal experience with violence had shown that abuse of power can only be countered by values of respect. In their own words:

Violence in any form includes humiliation and depreciation of the other person. When we engage in violence, we want to make the other “small” and ourselves superior. That stands in bold contrast to showing respect to one another. (Projekt Förderende, 2017).

So how did these teens create their culture of respect? They were part of a Positive Peer Culture program operating in a unit of a large youth prison near Adelsheim in southern Germany. Accompanying them to their conference presentation was a veteran prison guard. He recounted that many correctional staff used to call in sick because of the stress of this job. “But now we enjoy coming to work!”

Although confined in a secure prison, these youth have formed bonds of respect with peers and adults in authority. Recounting their transformation, one youth observed, “We used to have fights every day,

but now we never fight because we have learned to treat one another as human beings.” When the PPC groups mix with other prison residents in work details, it is apparent how different the tone is among youth who feel they must put on a front of toughness. While PPC youth are sometimes ridiculed by other inmates as being “soft,” they are secure in their core values: “We treat each other with respect.”

We first visited Adelsheim two years earlier as PPC Germany launched this peer-helping program in a secure unit of a sprawling youth prison. We explained to the two dozen teens in the initial groups that they would be asked to help one another. The goal was to encourage each young person to develop strengths in the four areas of the Circle of Courage:

Belonging: Building positive relationships with significant others

Mastery: Achieving, solving problems, and discovering strengths

Independence: Growing in personal power and responsibility

Generosity: Developing empathy and concern for others

We displayed colored drawings of these four concepts created by Native American artist George Bluebird for the book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). The youth were intrigued to learn that the artist himself is incarcerated for a crime committed in his youth.

While wary of “flaw-fixing” treatment, these young people embraced the four growth goals of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. It is little surprise that they seek to belong, for such is the lure of gangs. Further, they want to succeed, even though they may struggle in school. And the drive for independence and power is a centerpiece of adolescence. But generosity—getting teens hooked on helping—has been overlooked by major theories of psychology that presume humans are by nature self-centered (Wallach & Wallach, 1983).

Universal Values and Needs

In our book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002), we attempted to define the essential values and principles of effective restorative programs. Inspired by Lakota

psychologist Martin Brokenleg, we explored how traditional Native American cultures reared respectful and responsible youth without resorting to harsh punishment. We integrated that Indigenous knowledge with the contributions of youth work pioneers and modern developmental research. What emerged was a model for a reclaiming environment called The Circle of Courage. The basic principle is that young people thrive when reared in an environment that meets four universal needs:

Attachment. A sense of *belonging* and supportive relationships is essential for personal growth. Yet instead of belonging, many young people come to us distrustful, guarded, angry, and withdrawn; or they seek substitute attachments such as gangs and drug subcultures. Therefore, successful programs create close personal bonds with positive peers and caring adults.

Achievement. Without a sense of *mastery*, young people retreat from challenges and are unable to develop their full potentials. Repeated failure leads to frustration, lack of motivation, and a sense of futility. Thus, successful programs help youth kindle the desire for learning. Youth also gain practical skills in solving social and emotional problems through the peer-helping process.

Autonomy. To develop *independence*, persons must have a sense of personal power. This involves self-control, self-confidence, and the respect for the rights of others. In modern society, adults deprive youth of opportunities for responsibility and lament their lack of responsibility. Successful programs empower youth to set the course of their lives.

Altruism. Throughout history, *generosity* has insured human survival. One cannot develop a sense of self-worth without being of value to others. Youth lacking generosity are inconsiderate, self-indulgent, and lack a purpose for living. A pleasure-addicted culture fuels self-indulgent mentality and hedonistic lifestyles. Successful programs reverse this process as youth engage in helping one another and contributing to their community.

When an environment is attuned to these needs, a powerful synergy occurs. Both youth and staff feel connected, succeed, control their destiny, and show concern for others. Lakota psychologist Martin Brokenleg describes these Circle of Courage values as permeating most Indigenous cultures. For

thousands of years, children were reared in close relationships with caring elders and in cross-age groups where more mature youth modeled responsibility to their peers. In this climate of positive relationships, values were passed from generation to generation, and rites of passage welcomed children into responsible adulthood (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

Modern society has spawned a powerful youth subculture with alternative values, lore, language, dress, and behaviors. This youth culture is transnational, an artifact of the disconnection of adults to children in many modern cultures. Elders have diminished roles in socialization. Without extended family, tribe, and community bonds, children suffer from broken belongings. Clinging to other such youth, they become virtual prisoners of peers.

We cannot turn back history, but we can create environments matched to the needs of youth. Positive bonds to adults and peers are natural nutrients in settings where elders and young live in mutual respect. Positive Peer Culture is not a contrived curriculum but a community of concern where no one has the right to hurt and each is responsible for helping. This birthright of Indigenous children should be the standard for all our young people.

Born Generous

Neuroscientist Gerald A. Cory Jr. (2000) notes that the human brain has two algorithms, self-preservation and concern for others—he calls these Ego and Empathy. Children have the capacity for *emotional* empathy from birth and by school age develop *cognitive* empathy, the ability to imagine what others may be thinking or *theory of mind*. Of course, the logical brain can become ensnared with thinking errors that rationalize self-serving behavior.

Empathy is strongest if persons feel securely attached to a person or group. But whatever threatens attachment security also undermines compassion. Therefore, to create a climate of concern, all members must feel accepted and valued. Unfortunately, peer groups and gangs often do a better job of this than adult-directed programs.

Harvard researcher Carol Gilligan (1982) demonstrated that humans have two standards for making moral decisions: *justice* and *caring*. Males are more inclined towards justice (fairness) while

females are strongly motivated by caring (compassion). However, both standards are essential to living in harmony. As the Old Testament book of Micah proclaims: *act justly and love mercy*. These values are the moral foundation of peer helping programs.

Researchers from the Max Planck Institute have conducted many novel studies showing humans are born with moral minds and display both caring and justice from early childhood (Tomasello, 2014).

Caring: When toddlers observe an adult dropping an object, they automatically pick it up and give it to the person. Most two-year-olds show compassion to others, and this head start in helping predicts their prosocial behavior into adolescence (Rhee et al., 2013).

Justice: Preschoolers embrace group norms of fairness and begin enforcing these in their play. They share rather than hoard resources, and if they see a peer damaging another child's artwork or stealing property, they object and intervene.

While Indigenous cultures nurture this natural altruism, in Western society, students become more tolerant of violence and bullying as they advance through their school experience (Lantieri, 2008).

All holistic approaches to prevention or treatment have a moral component. While some see angry, hardened kids as untreatable, this is a sign of a lag in moral development. In Fritz Redl's terms, the task is to "massage numb values" and uncover hidden virtues in children who hate (Redl & Wineman, 1952).

Through peer-helping groups, youth with these lags can develop perspective taking and learn to respect the views of others. Surprisingly, even supposedly "antisocial" youth affirm the importance of moral values like keeping promises, telling the truth, helping others, not stealing, and obeying the law (Gregg, Gibbs, & Basinger, 1994). But if asked why honesty is important, many give immature self-serving reasons (so you don't get in trouble) instead of respect (treat persons like you want to be treated).

Some group programs have used formal discussions of hypothetical moral dilemmas such as proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg in the 1970s (Gibbs, 2014). While PPC is grounded in moral values, these are best taught in the natural setting. Real-

world problem-solving is more potent than discussions of contrived moral dilemmas. Thus, PPC uses natural peer helping to foster moral development, emotional regulation, and social competence.

Teaching Prosocial Behavior

While helping peers is a powerful experience, the broader goal is to generalize caring behavior beyond the school or treatment setting. A promising format for transfer of training is volunteer service-learning in the community (NYLC, 2007). Peer groups have become involved in a wide array of service projects including Special Olympics for the handicapped, painting houses for the elderly, presenting skits at day care centers, visiting residents of nursing homes, and raising money for community charities. Service learning is an antidote to narcissism, irresponsibility, and consumptive life styles. By stepping beyond themselves to help others, young people gain added proof of their own competence and worth.

Moral development researcher Martin Hoffman (2000) proposes using discipline in a positive way to teach prosocial behavior. He contrasts three common discipline strategies:

Power assertion. Administering punishment or rewards.

Love withdrawal. Withdrawing affection or acceptance.

Inductive discipline. Learning how behavior impacts self and others.

James Anglin (2002) interviewed administrators, staff, and students in ten Canadian group homes for youth at risk. While all the young people were experiencing pain, adults would often *react* to problems instead of *respond* to needs. Discipline would add more pain; for example, "Knock it off, you're pissing people off!" Anglin observes that punishment comes from the Latin word *poena*, which means pain. Literally, we are reacting to the pain-based behavior of young people by administering more pain.

Peer-helping programs define problems as actions that hurt self or others. Distressed or defiant behavior is reframed as *showing a problem*, and peers are called on to help rather than pile on more hurt. Once the spirit of generosity is established, these experiences can be truly inspirational and transformative.

Survival of the Most Compassionate

Charles Darwin proposed that compassion for others was the strongest instinct in humans. Contrary to popular myth, he never used the term “survival of the fittest” which was coined by social Darwinists to justify theories of racial superiority (Keltner, 2009). Following the death of his beloved daughter, Darwin became absorbed in studying concern for others—which he called sympathy. He concluded that compassion was even stronger than self-interest in most persons. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote that “those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish the best” (Darwin, 1871, p. 130). In simpler terms, humans have genetics for generosity.

Most professionals are aware of needs for Belonging, Mastery, and Independence, but are more likely to overlook Generosity. Prominent researchers Deci and Ryan lump Generosity into a generic drive for *relatedness*, “the need to love and be loved, to care for and be cared for” (Deci, 1996, p. 84). However, these two needs do not always co-exist. For example, a youth may actively seek belonging in a gang while pursuing a totally self-centered lifestyle.

At the most basic level, Belonging (seeking proximity and attaching to others) and Generosity (empathy and caring for others) use different brain-based circuits. Specifically, neural pathways for attachment are separate from those that activate caring (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). According to Louis Cozolino (2014), attachment develops in the first eighteen months as child and caregiver connect through right brain processes. On the other hand, caring involves other brain structures which give children the capacity to mirror the feelings of others and develop emotional and cognitive empathy.

There is now a growing consensus that our generous spirit has insured the survival of humans over evolutionary history. An international body of researchers summarized converging evidence that generosity is a cultural universal motivated by the design of the human brain (Aknin et al., 2014). While cultural differences either magnify or limit generosity, this is a driving force both in societies of abundance and in conditions of poverty. In the article, *Forget Survival of the Fittest: It's Kindness that Counts*, DiSalvo (2009) heralded the pivotal role of generosity in human well-being, drawing examples from research on positive psychology:

- Reflecting on compassion for others boosts immune functions and shifts the brain to the left hemisphere which is associated with positive emotions.
- Talking about what we are thankful for—whether in classrooms, at the dinner table, or in a diary—boosts happiness and health.
- Helping others rather than pursuing materialistic pleasures leads to lasting well-being.

In his 1935 classic, *The Origins of Love and Hate*, Scottish psychiatrist Ian Suttie criticized both behaviorism and psychoanalysis for failing to recognize that giving and receiving love were the primary human motivations. Children are born with a generous disposition, and, if their gifts are rejected, children feel bad and unlovable.

The baby then not only starts life with a benevolent attitude, but the Need-to-Give continues as a dominant motive throughout life, and, like every other need, brings anxiety when it is frustrated. (Suttie, 1935, p. 53)

Abraham Maslow originally believed that the drive for power was the primary human motivation until he studied the Northern Blackfoot tribe in Alberta, Canada. Their culture was oriented around generosity instead of dominance and accumulation of wealth. Maslow estimated that “eighty to ninety percent of the population must be rated about as high in ego security as the most secure individuals in our [own] society, who comprise perhaps five to ten percent at most” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 123). That experience influenced his hierarchy of human needs. However, reflecting his individualistic Western mindset, Maslow (1943) initially put self-actualization at the pinnacle of his pyramid of human needs. In the last year of his life, Maslow corrected this oversight by placing *self-transcendence*—commitment beyond self—as the highest level of his hierarchy (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Ironically, most text-books are still stuck with self-actualization at the pinnacle.

When humans experience safety and trust, this activates the brain’s polyvagal system which strengthens social engagement and switches off defensive fight/flight circuits (Porges & Dana, 2018). The level of compassion registers in the vagus nerve which Dacher Keltner (2009) calls the *caretaking nerve*. Persons with a strong vagal tone are more likely to offer compassion to one in need while those with a weak vagal tone disconnect from others and focus on self.

Compassion is among the strongest positive emotions in humans, apparent in even very young children—but it can be overridden by negative emotions including fear, anger, and prejudice. In such cases, humans suspend treating others as truly human. Brain imaging studies show that observing the poor, homeless, and those of different racial backgrounds does not always arouse empathy but may lead to indifference or even disgust. This insensitivity is not inborn but develops over time because of learned bias (Ludwig & Shah, 2016). Our challenge in a depersonalized, materialistic modern society is to restore the bonds of community.

Trumping Power with Generosity

Since all humans seek to exercise power over their lives, this need can only be met in cultures where power is shared. Dacher Keltner (2016) notes that power will inevitably corrupt unless it is directed towards the service of others. His prescriptions for positive power are all grounded in tapping our brain-based motivation for generosity:

Respect. Humans deeply value being treated with esteem. By showing respect to others, we dignify them. Those with less power are often the most gifted purveyors of respect—praise, polite language, humble behavior—virtues that all should share. We display respect by asking questions, listening, and showing curiosity; we offer genuine compliments, praise with gusto, and express gratitude.

Empathy. This includes the ability to read the emotions of others as well as understand what they may be thinking. Empathy is often an automatic response to those we care about and who are like us. The challenge is to help persons develop concern for those who may be different and even belligerent. As a youth in a peer-helping program said, “It is hard to like kids who hurt others, but it is our job to help them with their problems.”

Gratitude. Expressing appreciation for the contributions of others doubles the likelihood that persons will be helpful with a future task. Gratitude activates the reward and safety regions of the brain, also calming stress. Gratitude can be conveyed in nonverbal communication as well as the spoken word.

Kindness. Small recurrent acts of kindness weave the fabric of social communities. For example, touching is a natural way that people provide support to one another. A reassuring pat on the back

or warm embrace releases oxytocin, a neurochemical that promotes trust, cooperation, and sharing. Acts of kindness make persons feel esteemed and valued.

In sum, these are the values espoused by the youth in peer-helping groups. *In Circle of Courage terms, the ultimate control on abuse of power is generosity.*

Today, interventions of every ilk compete to gain the “evidence-based” label. Gharabaghi (2008) noted that so-called evidence-based methods are seldom grounded in relational child and youth care. Instead, professionals seek methods from approved lists of evidence-based programs such as cognitive therapy. This ignores the fact that relationships are the most powerful agents of change (Li & Julian, 2012).

The ultimate control on abuse of power is generosity.

Positive Peer Culture is unique among evidence-based treatments because it is grounded in relational science and practice (James, 2011; Laursen, 2010). While a positive youth climate is essential in a therapeutic milieu, this requires staff who model respectful relationships. Thus, PPC concentrates on building staff teamwork and positive organizational climates. Research also shows that engagement in school is a robust predictor of positive outcomes from PPC programs (Gold & Osgood, 1992).

Generosity builds resilience (Steinebach, Steinebach, & Brendtro, 2013). The most extensive resilience research was conducted by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1992) on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. In 1955, they began following a birth cohort of children from high-risk backgrounds. These youngsters experienced many problems in childhood and adolescence—but, by middle adulthood, a majority would overcome virtually any risk condition. The term “resilience” was coined to describe this ability to surmount adversity. We were able to interview Emmy Werner while she was conducting the 55-year follow-up of the Kauai children. She described Circle of Courage needs as integral to the development of resilience (Werner, 2012).

The resilience movement has become a central theme of youth work—but at the level of practice and policy, the goal is control (Gharabaghi, 2014; Steinebach & Gharabaghi, 2013). The dominant mentality is this: If behavior is bad, increase pun-

ishment and reduce rewards; do the opposite for good behavior. The tacit purpose of youth work is enforcing compliance by manipulating rewards and consequences. This mindset is deeply imbedded in cultures of dominance but contradicts democratic values. Even if we cannot change societal norms, we can create alternative environments that meet children's needs.

A consilience of research on sociobiology, neuroscience, and resilience shows that humans have adapted to live in egalitarian cultures over hundreds of thousands of years (Boehm, 2012). There is now abundant evidence that generosity is key to surviving and thriving (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2015; Steinebach et al., 2018). Neuroscience validates age-old wisdom. These enduring truths are the core of powerful living and learning environments.

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Endnotes

1. This article is condensed from a chapter by the author in a German-language book (Brendtro, 2019).
2. See California Evidence-Based Clearing House. <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/positive-peer-culture/detailed>
3. In terminology from DSM-5 would be "Conduct Disorder with Limited Prosocial Emotions" and on the pathway to developing "Anti-social Personality Disorder" (APA, 2013).