

Nurturing Morality

Edited by

Theresa A. Thorkildsen

*University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois*

and

Herbert J. Walberg

*University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois*



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Chapter 10

Institutional Support for Morality

Community-based and Neighborhood Organizations

Constance Flanagan

Rational choice predicts that few people will be active in community affairs when, in fact, many are (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

In their study of the factors that explain Americans' participation in collective action, Verba and his colleagues question the logic of rational choice theories that hold that citizens will refrain from activity on behalf of a collective good. Because individuals reap the benefits of collective goods whether or not they participate in the political process, rational choice theory suggests that it is smart for citizens to save their resources and abstain from community involvement, to "take a free ride." Verba et al. state: "The puzzle of participation, thus, becomes: how are we to explain the fact that millions of citizens, in apparent defiance of this elegant logic, vote or take part in various kinds of voluntary activity on behalf of collective ends?" The authors' answer is that the benefit of participation includes the satisfaction gained from "doing one's share to make the community, nation, or world a better place." This chapter argues that participation in community-based or neighborhood organizations (hereafter referred to as CBOs or CBYO for community-based youth organizations) nurtures a civic ethic in young people. By engaging in such groups, youths learn that "bearing the cost becomes part of the benefit" (Verba et al., 1995, pp. 100-103).

This realization does not occur for the first time in adulthood. Rather, it is learned through practice during the formative years of youth. Opportunities for nonformal learning in CBOs may play a key role in this process. A host of studies have shown a connection between young people's involvement in CBOs and extracurricular activities and their involvement in community affairs later in adulthood. We know less about the mechanisms that might explain this association. This chapter discusses three reasons for the role these groups play in civic engagement and shows that each is a way in which CBOs nurture morality. First, CBOs provide a structured outlet for leisure time, including a prosocial reference group of peers and adult mentors who are typically models of moral behavior.

Second, CBOs provide opportunities to work toward goals that are collectively defined in a context where the status of all members is relatively equal. When they engage in group projects, peers hold one another accountable to the group, and individuals see that their interests are realized in those of the group. The habits that develop through these practices become integral to the youths' evolving identities and are the basis from which moral actions flow (Youniss & Yates, 1999). Virtues of loyalty, team spirit, trust, and trustworthiness—dispositions that are foundational for citizenship—are nourished (Flanagan, 2004).

Third, CBOs develop social trust. Their potential for extending the radius of humanity that youths trust and for whom they feel responsible depends on how much diversity exists within the organization and on the range of other groups in the community with which members of the organization interact.

Prosocial Reference Group and Constructive Use of Leisure Time

Whether or not we believe that idle time is the devil's workshop, the evidence is clear that the after-school hours from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. are the times when most juvenile misdemeanors occur and, therefore, are times of greatest need for community supervision. That niche is filled by many after-school clubs and neighborhood organizations. These programs play a role in informal social control insofar as youths who participate in structured youth groups are less likely to be involved in antisocial activities or substance abuse. In some studies, sports participation is an exception to this rule, possibly because of its status in the hierarchy of social cliques at school and the inclination of jocks and the popular crowd to drink alcohol. Additionally, as the Positive Coaching Alliance (Thompson, 2000) has pointed out, many sports programs are characterized by competition, an absence of

team spirit, and uneven enforcement of the rules. The relationship between sports and moral development may also depend on the participant's motivation for participating and on the importance of winning to his or her self-esteem.

However, in general, CBOs share some common features that nurture identities that transcend the self. For example, compared with schools, CBOs' nonformal and less hierarchical organizational structure is better suited to nurturing the affective ties of young people to fellow members of their communities. In one study of African American youths in low-income urban communities, Kahne and his colleagues found that in CBOs, compared with schools, youths felt more respected by adults, more comfortable with and trusting of peers, and generally more accepted (Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001). Affective or emotional ties to a community are a foundation for nurturing morality. When young people feel wanted and believe that they count in the affairs of the community, they are less likely to violate its norms. The absence of such affective ties is a problem for individuals as well as communities. Terms such as "disaffected" and "alienated" point to the significance we accord to a "sense of place" in youths' identities. When youths feel a "sense of place" in their communities, they come to see that their interests are realized in the interests of the whole. By extension, as adults, they will see that contributing to the community is not just an option; rather, they will believe it is simply the right thing to do.

The opportunities that CBOs offer for social incorporation and connection to prosocial outlets may be especially important for youths who, for one reason or another, have been marginalized from mainstream society. For example, the concept of social reintegration into the community figures prominently in the restorative justice approach to juvenile crime. In contrast to a retributive framework in which juvenile offenders are held accountable to the state, restorative justice practices emphasize youths' obligations to repair the harm done to their victims and to the broader community. Practices such as victim-offender mediation, community service, and conflict resolution are designed to repair relationships. But it is not only the offender who engages in reparation; community members also are made aware of ways that they may make the youths feel more included (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999). Although few controlled studies of this approach to juvenile justice have been conducted, some evidence suggests that community service is more effective than detention in reducing recidivism. Community service in combination with group discussion and reflection on the experience is also effective in risk prevention programs. Community service may be one of the few opportunities that many young people have to demonstrate the contributions they can make to

their communities. The role of community service in nurturing morality is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Membership and Solidarity

Aristotle described the polis as a network of friends bound together by the pursuit of a common good and an isolate as either a beast or a god who is unable or has no need to share in the benefits of political association. CBOs are organizations neither of beasts nor of gods but of people. They are settings where young people can explore communities of membership beyond the boundaries of their families. And whereas membership in families is a given, membership in CBOs is earned. In fact, in the give-and-take of what are, in principle, horizontal relationships among equals, democratic dispositions (e.g., tolerance, trust, and commitment to the collective) develop.

In CBOs, youths often work in groups, defining together the projects they plan to do. Peers hold one another accountable to those projects. Youths learn that they should keep promises they make to the group or risk "losing face" in the eyes of their friends. If they do not carry their weight or do their part, projects may not get done, and the whole group suffers. If they are loyal to the group, they demonstrate allegiance by doing their part. These practices shape character. If others count on us, we are held to that standard and we internalize it. The reciprocity between trust and trustworthiness is evident: Peers trust that members will come through for the group; if they do come through, they are trustworthy. Ultimately, these virtues of trust, loyalty, and responsibility are the bases of citizenship or loyalty to the polity (Flanagan, 2004).

However, group solidarity is not a given. It is achieved by working through differences and finding common ground. The egalitarian, peer-like structure of CBYOs suits them for this task. Compared with families or schools, in which relationships of power and authority are more asymmetrical, the status of the members in CBYOs is roughly the same. The consequences of disagreeing with others and of voicing opposing opinions are the same for all members of the group. Thus, such groups afford opportunities to practice democratic skills, including engaging in civil debate, asserting one's own and listening to others' perspectives, and deliberating and accommodating together. In the process, youths gain the skills of democratic citizens. They learn to make informed judgments, voice autonomous opinions, and hear other points of view. They realize that each member of the group cannot always get what he or she wants but that it is worth speaking up because their views often resonate with those of

others. They may also decide that the social interaction and the feeling of solidarity itself are rewarding and that the group product is better than that which the individuals could have accomplished separately.

In democracies, citizens are expected to make decisions free from control by the state. A "good citizen" is not merely one who follows the rules but one who deliberates on the rules and questions them when they are unjust. For example, during the civil rights movement, good citizens challenged laws of segregation. Because deliberation and the exercise of judgment are virtues of good citizens, opportunities for self-determination, perspective taking, and deliberation are important in the formative years. Families and schools do provide such opportunities, and a sizable literature on authoritative parenting styles and democratic school climates shows that encouraging young people to voice their opinions promotes positive development, partly because of the reflection and deliberation that are involved in the process. But the role of adults is different in these settings compared with their role in CBYOs. In schools and families, adults provide structure. In CBYOs, youths are in charge.

Successful CBYOs have been described as partnerships between youths and adults characterized by mutual respect and equality. Respect for young people is also high on the list of qualities of good teachers and parents. However, equal status is not an accurate description of young people's relationships with adults in these settings. In CBYOs, adults act as facilitators, mentors, and coaches but not as leaders. Youths lead, make decisions, carry through on plans, and learn from their successes and failures. For adults, striking the right balance between guidance and freedom is challenging. A *laissez-faire* approach, leaving youths to their own devices, is irresponsible and ignores age differences in experience. But having adults in positions of leadership robs young people of the practice they need in negotiating group decisions and seeing projects through. When asked, youths say they do seek particular kinds of interaction and support from adults in CBYOs. They want adults to dialogue with and coach them. They are also aware that adults are better connected to sources of institutional, community, and political power (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The organization itself will not survive if adults are nonresponsive to young people. After all, CBYOs, unlike schools and families, are voluntary associations. If they provide a poor fit for the competencies and needs of young people, the young people can simply leave.

Adults in CBYOs, similar to teachers in schools, also set norms of civic and moral behavior. Although equal status is a condition that fosters intergroup relations and tolerance, peer groups are riddled with inequities that can surface and undermine their democratic potential. Leaving young people to handle disputes themselves is irresponsible and typically results

in the bullies winning. Instead, adults should be proactive. When they set a standard of tolerance and civility, they nurture the democratic character of young people. In our school-based studies, we have found a positive relationship between young people's commitment to public interest goals (e.g., their desire to contribute to their communities and to make their society a better place) and their perceptions that their teachers have equal expectations for all students and would actively intervene to stop acts of intolerance (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). As a group, adults who work in CBYOs also tend to be models of civic virtue. They either volunteer their time or are employed in the field of youth work, where compensation for their time is relatively low. In this sense, they are not motivated by self-interest but instead are dedicated to the welfare of others, namely young people.

As one of the formative settings where young people spend time, CBYOs, similar to schools, are mediating institutions. They are settings where the principles of the social contract, the ties that bind members of communities, nation-states, and citizens together, are interpreted and negotiated. To the extent that principles of tolerance, freedom, and equality—values that are arguably the bedrock of our American identity—guide the goals of CBYOs and are reinforced in their practices, these virtues become part of the character of younger generations. But CBYOs are voluntary associations, and in their policies and practices, they can also marginalize and exclude people. The policy of the Boy Scouts of America to exclude gay men and boys from membership is one prominent example.

At the same time, as mediating institutions, CBYOs can be spaces where conventions are challenged and new organizational forms take shape. For example, in response to young people who have been marginalized by mainstream institutions, a range of youth-led grassroots CBOs is evolving. These organizations provide a "free space" where young people can test new ideas. They are safe spaces, places with structure provided by a set of rules that are collectively generated by the group (Flanagan, 2004).

In these organizations, the good of the group (or the common good) takes precedence over self-interests. Dedication to the group is the principle to which leaders are held accountable by their peers. Ample opportunities exist to spread leadership roles across the membership of the organization. This emphasis on the collective minimizes the likelihood that individuals or small groups will take over. The dispersion of responsibilities also means that individuals across the organization learn new skills and ensures that the organization will be sustained. Responsibilities are graduated according to individuals' abilities and experiences, with older youths coaching their less experienced peers. In these organizations, youths are not merely

staying off the streets and out of trouble; they are also typically providing tangible products, things of value for their communities. Perhaps the best example is the affordable housing units that the YouthBuild program provides to residents of their communities (see Stoneman, 2002, for more details on YouthBuild).

Trust

Another way that CBOs nurture a civic ethic in young people is by developing their trust in others, not just in people they know well but also their trust in humanity. Whereas interpersonal trust is our level of confidence in people we know well, social trust is our belief about humanity in general. That is, do we believe that people are generally fair, helpful, and trustworthy, or do we suspect that most people are out for their own gain and would take advantage of us if we let down our guard?

Among adults, participation in CBOs and levels of social trust are positively related and mutually reinforcing. In fact, the relationship has been described as a "virtuous circle": People who trust others are more likely to join CBOs. In addition, their faith in human beings increases as a result of their participation. In our program of work, we have found that compared with their peers who are not involved in any organizations in the community or at school, adolescents who participate in at least one organization have more benevolent views about people who live in their communities (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, in press). Their opinions are that "most people care about making this a good place to live; generally, there are people I can go to for help; people who live here can be counted on to pull together and solve problems that we face."

What might explain this connection? Two complementary processes may be at work. The first concerns how youths use their time when they are alone (i.e., watching television) and the stereotypical views of humanity on TV. The second concerns the enriched view of humanity one gains by working with other people in CBOs and the generally benevolent views of others that emerge when people work together toward a "common good." Young people who are not involved in organized groups are likely to spend significant amounts of their time watching entertainment television. Studies of adults and young people have shown an inverse relationship between high levels of TV viewing and trust. Compared with what we might call "real life," portraits of humanity on entertainment TV tend to be stereotypical and mean spirited. Between contestants competing to become a millionaire and those ratting on one another on survivalist shows, one has to wonder whether anyone on "reality" TV can be trusted. Likewise, tuning into news

programs hardly engenders a sense of trust in the leaders of the financial, political, or even the religious institutions of society.

By contrast, in CBOs, people have multiple face-to-face opportunities to get to know real others and to generalize this rich experience to what they believe about most people. In real life, youths get to know others on good days and bad and come to know their virtues and their faults. They see other people in different roles and develop a more nuanced view of humanity. At times, any one of us may be out for our own gain. But at other times, we have the good of the group in mind. Furthermore, although people have different motivations for joining CBOs, the goal of these organizations is to bring different members of the community together in common pursuits. The organizations themselves are a "public good" shared by members of the community. As already noted, people who join CBOs tend to have higher levels of trust than those who do not join. In the course of participating in an organization's activities, the reciprocal relationship between trust and trustworthiness becomes evident. By fulfilling responsibilities to the organization or group, members demonstrate that they are trustworthy and that others can rely on them to come through on behalf of the group. And by learning about these same virtues in other members of the group, members' faith in humanity is reinforced.

However, CBOs may also have downsides regarding nurturing morality. Strong ties and loyalty to a group can exist at the expense of letting others in. Exclusionary practices can be intentional, but they are more likely to result from unintentional (and unexamined) factors. For example, organizations with long lives in communities may not have adapted their practices to respond to the increasingly diverse populations moving into those communities.

Bonding and Bridging Trust

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) distinguishes between trust that exists in close relationships with people we know well (which he refers to as "bonding social capital") and trust of others outside these close networks of association (i.e., "bridging social capital"). By no means are the two mutually exclusive. The latter, however, is essential for the sustenance of a diverse democracy. It is not enough that adults and youths interact with and trust people they know well; democracies need people who are also ready to work toward common goals with fellow citizens who are *different* from themselves.

However, many of our experiences with others are with people who are similar to us. CBOs are not an exception to this rule insofar as they are typically based in geographical communities and are thus rather

homogeneous. "Virtual" communities via the Internet may be a means of overcoming these geographical boundaries, but the verdict is still out on whether the Internet is being used either by adults or young people in ways that promote democracy. Of course, citywide organizations may pool from a more diverse population; these organizations should be cognizant in their programming of their potential for nurturing intergroup relations and democratic character. Youths' views about the polity or even what they might consider the common good depends on the breadth of their experiences with fellow members of their communities. Ultimately, when faced with political decisions, our perspectives and our notions about a fair distribution of resources depends on whether we have learned to see issues from more than our own narrow point of view.

Community Service

Well before service learning was institutionalized in schools, service to the community was a common practice of many CBOs. For example, members of the 4-H Club have for many years pledged to dedicate their heads, hearts, hands, and health "to better living" for their club, community, country, and world. Performing community service is one of the few opportunities youths have to interact with others who are different from themselves. Although engaging in community service could result in reinforcing group stereotypes (and for this reason, it is important that groups engaged in service collectively reflect on their experience), some studies have found increases in tolerance and reductions in racial prejudice associated with service. Why? Youniss and Yates (1999) argue that direct service with people who lack basics such as food and shelter is an opportunity for youths to interact face to face with fellow human beings and to enlarge the circle of humanity for whom they feel responsible.

In our studies (Flanagan et al., in press), we have noted three changes that youths mention when asked what they learned in their service experience that we believe are associated with the development of social trust. First, by having face-to-face encounters with real individuals who are members of stereotypical groups (e.g., elderly or poor individuals), stereotypes break down. Service provides an opportunity to, as one teen said, to "meet new people and learn that not all people are bad." The notion that "not all people are bad" suggests a mechanism whereby social trust is built through such encounters. Rather than malevolent images of stereotypical others, young people have mental schemas based on concrete experiences with real elderly people or homeless people.

Second, participants in our studies pointed to ways that they accommodated and ways that their preconceptions changed. "I learned to be

patient with little kids, to respect the elderly, not to be afraid of homeless people, to know and to trust old people," said one young person. These remarks imply not only changes in the youth's attitudes but also changes in her conception of what we have called the "social contract," or the obligations that bind members of a community together. As one young person summarized, "Always give help because it will probably be there when you need it back."

Finally, participation in community service adds to the collective stock of faith in humanity by exposing young people to adults in human service professions and in the volunteer sector. One respondent wrote, "I learned that there are a lot of people who are kind, who care, and are willing to help others." In the literature on community service, little attention is given to the fact that the staff members of human service agencies are, for the most part, people who are not out for their own gain but genuinely do care about others. Insofar as young people are still formulating ideas about the kind of adults they aspire to become, interactions with those in public service or in nongovernment voluntary organizations could be inspiring. Whether or not they choose to do similar work when they are older, their concepts of humanity should be informed by these interactions.

Community-based youth organizations incorporate younger generations into the polity. They stabilize democracies to the extent that their practices develop democratic dispositions in young people. But opportunities for youths to join these organizations are unevenly distributed. Compared with more privileged neighborhoods, poorer communities have fewer economic resources and a lower adult-to-child ratio; therefore, they have a smaller pool of potential adult volunteers from which to draw (Hart & Atkins, 2002). In the United States, more privileged persons are likely to participate in the political process. Better-educated, better-paid, and better-connected people are more likely to have a voice. Participation in faith-based community organizations is one of the few venues that offer less privileged individuals the chance to practice leadership and organizational skills that later pay off in their political participation (Verba et al., 1995). If CBYOs were widely available, they could play a similar role in redressing class inequities in political participation.

As an early observer of American mores, Alexis de Tocqueville (1848/1969) referred to groups such as CBOs as the "schools of democracy" where citizens from different backgrounds met to resolve issues of common concern. Besides being places where local issues are negotiated, the dispositions of citizens are shaped by the practices of these organizations. De Tocqueville contended that it was the commitments people feel to the common good that keep Americans' individualist tendencies from corroding into narrow self-interest. In this sense, CBOs do provide

institutional support for morality. Instead of promoting a "free ride," they nurture in youths a belief that bearing the cost is part of the benefit.

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Considering the Common Good

Wisdom is not just about maximizing one's own or someone else's self-interests but about balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and with various contextual aspects (extrapersonal) such as one's city, country, environment, or even God. These interests must also be balanced over both the short and long term. In wisdom, one seeks a common good, realizing that this common good may be better for some than for others.

—Robert J. Sternberg and Steven E. Stemler

This book is not about how bad things have gotten on the moral front, and it contains no whining. Rather, the book's strong themes are *pluralism* or *diversity*, *responsibility*, *exemplarity*, and *affectivity*. Readers who gravitate to titles designed to spell out *how to* or contribute to *feel-good* forms of spirituality may not know to look here for practical counsel and inspiration. But they will find it here.

—Martin E. Marty