

Book Review: *Jacked Up and Unjust: Pacific Islander Teens Confront Violent Legacies*
Authors: Katherine Irwin & Karen Umemoto
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Background

This nine-year ethnography reports on “violence prevention programming” (p. 4) for mainly Pacific Islander female and male adolescents. The research was conducted at two Hawai‘i public high schools on O‘ahu. The principal researchers, University of Hawai‘i professors, Katherine Irwin, and Karen Umemoto, have studied adolescent violence extensively. This study was conducted from 2007 through 2015. It began when school counselors asked the authors “about collaborating to provide services for teens having trouble in school, often fighting” (p. 2).

Research design

The authors researched youth perceptions and experiences to understand how gender, “systems of male domination,” and how being a “Pacific Islander” affect the youth’s behavior and beliefs (p. 4).

The authors obtained funding for *weekly lunch bunch sessions* at the two high schools, which included “food, curriculum, activities, and field trips for the teens” (p. 2). “The lunch bunch was a therapeutic program that allowed students to discuss emotions, pain, trauma, turmoil, and routes to healing” (p. 184). “[S]chool administrators referred [students] to the lunch group program not only for fighting

but also for ‘acting out’ in class” (p. 78). Attendance was voluntary, and those who attended consistently reported the sessions were valuable experiences.

Approximately 100 teens participated in the lunch bunch sessions. The authors met with around seven girls and seven boys each year during the nine-year project. Based on the meetings, which included observations and interviewing the teens, several focus groups were conducted. Sixty-three adults including “parents, high school staff, and juvenile justice and community workers” were interviewed (p. 4). Narratives for ninety-nine youth were analyzed.

Youth studied

Angel’s and Benny’s (fictitious names) life stories, along with “stories of ninety-seven other adolescents,” were studied (p. 4). Angel at age 16 was a reputed tough fighter. She was larger than most girls, and many boys including Benny, who was slender, and also well known for his fighting abilities. The stories of the two youth show the differences gender makes in socialization and treatment of girls’ and boys’ (descriptive terms the youth used to describe themselves), and their motivations, behaviors, and reputations.

Considering the context of youth violence

“Many of the youth interviewed for this study have faced extremely challenging life circumstances” (p. 23), including racism. The author’s “assert that it is time to take the multifaceted nature and the long history of racial inequalities in America seriously in our theories” (p. 155). Since the book’s publication, the federal government released data showing a disproportionate share of Native Hawaiians

and Pacific Islander youth are expelled from Hawai'i schools compared to other ethnic groups (Lee, 2018).

The authors found: "Much of the violence in our study could be traced to youth's pasts, which were marked by trauma, racialized poverty, and alienation, and had to do with unrequited pain and suffering (p. 160). The authors' observation that many youth who behaved violently had also suffered victimization supports the "victim offender overlap," one of criminology's most consistent findings (Lauritsen & Laub 2007).

Theory of colonial patriarchy

The authors advance a non-pathological model of youth violence that "sees violence as an impulsive act born out of micro-level and situational circumstances, as well as a response to macro structures" (p. 160). They argue that the *theory of colonial patriarchy* applies to Pacific Islander youth who have been subjected to gender, racial, and economic discrimination. These youth suffer from an array of difficult emotions including "worry, distress, sadness, frustration, irritability, outrage, self-hatred, depression, and disappointment" (p. 160).

Study outcomes

"One of the most important findings of our study is that violence is not a fixed trait" (p. 127).

All of the teens in this study (even the most violent among them) changed their thinking, motivations, and behaviors. Most importantly, every teen became less violent and aggressive over the course of this study, and some teens ceased lashing out violently altogether. Not one of the teens in this study was remorseless (p. 127).

The research results are consistent with other studies showing that youth

have excellent rehabilitation and desistance prospects. “The vast majority of juvenile offenders, even those who commit serious crimes, grow out of antisocial activity as they transition to adulthood. Most juvenile offending is, in fact, limited to adolescence” (Steinberg, Cauffman & Monahan, 2015, p. 1).

The research also revealed that the girls had remarkable insight into their plights. They found how to help themselves in managing their situations (p. 43). And the boys understood that “violence in their world was about fighting the myriad indignities of racialized disrespect” (p. 89).

The authors discuss the two main ways they found that youth changed:

The first process of change occurred with the help of what we call ‘the second line of defense.’ When a youth’s family members would not or could not help a youth make important changes, it was often a set of adults outside of the teen’s family who became ‘the second line of defense’ by stepping in to offer long-term support and advocacy.

. . .

The second process of change was one that we call ‘going it alone,’ meaning that many youth relied on their own wits, talents, and assets to help themselves. Teens who were ‘going it alone’ believed that adults would not or could not help them solve problems or support them as they prepared for adulthood (p. 127).

Replacing punitive responses with compassion and healing

The authors note the harmfulness of America’s punitive responses to youth violence, including “zero tolerance” and ignoring prejudice and discrimination. They point out that “the United States [is] a nation-state steeped in an economy and culture that perpetuates violence” (p. 105).

There is an unhelpful irony in applying retribution and punitive responses to adolescent fighting. It sends youth “messages that glorify the performance of

violence in everyday life, [while] they are also receiving some of the harshest penalties in legal history for acting with violence” (p. 106).

The authors note that Hawai'i's family court, which hears juvenile justice cases, is recognized for using a “therapeutic” model. Retired judge, and current Hawai'i parole board member Michael Town, introduced the term “therapeutic justice” to describe the court's model. In 1996, a restorative *family group conferencing* model was piloted in the Honolulu family court through judge Town's leadership. The model, known as *'ohana conferencing* applies therapeutic justice principals. Today, Hawai'i state law mandates the process for child welfare cases (Hawai'i Revised Statutes, 2017).

The court's therapeutic practice has been applied to child welfare cases for the last 20 years. The authors note the contradiction between the court's therapeutic approach, and its rate of juvenile incarceration: “A 2013 study conducted by the Hawai'i Juvenile Justice Working Group found that Hawai'i was incarcerating a high proportion of youth for relatively minor offenses” (p. 114 footnote omitted). I was a member of this Juvenile Justice Working Group. I also represented youth and families in both child protection and violence cases as a family court lawyer. Hawai'i's juvenile justice system had punished youth for social difficulties, e.g., incarcerating a youth for not going to school; for failing to enter substance abuse treatment timely; and even for becoming pregnant while on probation.

The authors correctly note there is a “persistent public neglect of the least powerful in U.S. society” (p. 116). Many have suffered injustice by institutional

forces, and have been “jacked-up” by the justice system. Many youth understand this, and the authors paid close attention to how the youth used the “images of past injustices to make sense of the world and, especially, of their place in it” (p. 155). Addressing social injustice, including how historical trauma might be healed, is needed.

Since October 2015, after this book was drafted, the Hawai’i state Office of Youth Services (OYS), which administers Hawai’i youth prison, has provided *wraparound services*.

Wraparound services target youth and their families involved in the juvenile justice system who experience very complicated situations that require intensive interventions and services with multiple state agencies. The Wraparound is a definable planning process that results in a unique set of community services and natural support that are individualized for a child and family to achieve a positive set of outcomes. (Office of Youth Services, 2016, p. 3 as revised by K. Tufono-Iosefa, personal communication, June 29, 2017).

Between October 2015 and July 2017, approximately 35 youth received services.

Wraparound is consistent with the authors’ argument for “nonjudgmental and caring adult” roles (p. 28), and for an “ethic of care” (p. 118) to assist youth who behave violently. While much of the book focuses on explanations for violence, the authors dedicate considerable effort on solutions too.

Chapter 9 *Compassionate and Constructive Policy and Practice* encourages a restorative justice approach, which has had a slow reception in the United States compared to other countries. The authors point out that it is:

[C]ommon knowledge that the majority of violence takes place between individuals who know each other. Violence is often a result of interpersonal or intergroup conflict that could be resolved constructively given different cultural and material circumstances (p. 165).

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The authors suggest *Ho'oponopono: A Path Toward Healing and Reconciliation*.

Ho'oponopono is an ancient practice used "prior to Western contact in Hawai'i to handle problems leading to illness, unease, or conflict at the level of the 'ohana or family, often within the extended family" (p. 166). The "Ohana Conferencing process for child welfare applies elements of ho'oponopono (Adams & Chandler, 2002).

The authors also describe "Ho'opono Mamo Civil Citation Initiative" a pilot program introduced in 2015 to divert juveniles at arrest to "appropriate support systems" (p. 176). Merton Chinen, director of OYS, helped develop Ho'opono Mamo and believes the diversion program has been successful in helping move Hawai'i's juvenile justice system from one based mainly on punishment to a more healing and restorative approach for youth and their families (M. Chinen, personal communication, July 4, 2017).

The book ends with the authors' vision for the future:

Moving forward, we believe it is important to develop a more holistic understanding of violence, as we have proposed in this book, and to abandon the misleading dichotomy between leniency and punishment. The more important question is how can we best support youth who confront violence and other problems at the intersection of race, gender, and class inequalities, given the conditions of colonialism (p. 176).

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