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Eddie Ellis, Credible Messengers and the Neo-Liberal Imagination of Anti-Violence

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Abstract

I trace the socio-historical pathway of the concept of the credible messenger and related youth anti-violence interventions from the 1930's to a more radically imagined iteration by Eddie Ellis in the 1980s. The focus shifts to its present-day iterations as I review two widely adopted anti-violence programs. I conclude that today credible messengers and anti-violence interventions are: (i) primarily imagined within a framework of neo-liberal possibility; (ii) valued for their contributions on individual and/or group behavioral change; and (iii) conceived in programs outside of any discourse on the structural roots of crime, collective agency, or the historical struggle for social change and empowerment.

Introduction

In 2014 the New York City Department of Probation became the first state agency in the United States to employ the radical concept of transformative mentoring (TM) as part of its multi-faceted programs aimed at reducing recidivism and enhancing the social rehabilitation of its youth charges. Described as learning *“how to motivate youth by drawing out what is within rather than merely imposing information from without. In a nurturing pro-social environment, they (mentors) help youth focus on changes in cognition and behavior that precede the ability to make progress in education and employment”* (Austria and Peterson 2017).

TM was a departure from the usual mentoring praxis, both in terms of its practice and its practitioners.ⁱ Those recruited for this important task did not come from the usual range of backgrounds with some having life-course experiences like their mentees while others heralded from more stable working-class and middle-class populations with formal educational credentials and professional training. The radical concept of TM now implemented by the city agency instead turned to what is called the “credible messenger” (CM) to carry out the mentoring, social actors whose primary qualifications were that they came precisely from the same community as their mentees with both the “insider” knowledge of the community and of

a criminal justice system that had so impacted them (xxxxx, Kessler, Martinez, Kontos and Muhammad, Forthcoming).

These requisite qualities of the CM saw a different value placed on the experience, profile, knowledge and engagement of the new recruits. For this intervention was not imagined in the hallowed halls of an academic institution but in the prison cells of an infamous maximum-security facility within the vast system of the New York State Department of Corrections.ⁱⁱ

In the following, I trace the socio-historical pathway of the credible messenger from its 1930's role in an intervention promoting informal social control to its 1950s version aimed at youth deviance and violence prevention, both of which conceived by mainstream social scientists, to the more radically imagined iteration in the 1980s. The focus then shifts to its present-day iterations, as I critically review two widely adopted anti-violence interventions with one utilizing versions of CMs while the other relies on conventional state agents and community collaboration. There are similarities across all the interventions, but the conceptual frames, goals and practices vary markedly with the prison-originated version remaining a radical outlier compared to the rest. I conclude that today credible messengers and anti-violence interventions are: (i) primarily imagined within a framework of neo-liberal possibility; (ii) valued for their contributions through emphases on individual and/or group behavioral change; and (iii) conceived in programs outside of any discourse on the structural roots of crime, collective agency, or the historical struggle for social change and empowerment (Muhammad 2010).

Credible Messengers and History

There are three main precursors to the current credible messenger movement. The Chicago Area Project (CAP) led by the sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay during the 1930s, the Street Club Project of New York City supported by Mayor Robert Wagner, and the inmate criminological work of Eddie Ellis and his Think Tank Group in the 1980s at Greenhaven Penitentiary.

(i) The Chicago Area Project

The first CMs were present in the famous Chicago Area Project (CAP) during the 1930s and referred to as “curbside counselors” (Schlossman and Sedlak 1983).ⁱⁱⁱ These were project workers who were:

“ideally young adults...with whom delinquent youth could identify easily – either those who had somehow internalized and acted upon conventional values despite their upbringing in the Bush, or those who had once been active criminals but who, after punishment or simply maturation, had changed radically and become law-abiding citizens” (Schlossman and Sedlak 1983:429).

In commentary based on the copious archival field notes and reports from the CAP, Schlossman and Sedlak concluded the following about these innovative new recruits:

“(they) served as both model and translator of conventional social values with which youth...had had little previous contact or awareness (or so the counselors assumed). To the chagrin of professional social workers...the street workers did indeed appear to accept the boys' deviant attitudes, values, and behavior as "normal" within the cultural matrix... Convinced that formal contact with the police or the juvenile justice system only reinforced children's allegiance to a deviant code of conduct...In sum, curbstone counseling was not a "technique" of intervention, but a philosophy, a style, an individual moral presence. It was less social work per se than aggressive, omnipresent caring and monitoring of "youth at risk" in their natural, criminogenic (sic.) habitats.”

This view of the counselor fitted well with Shaw’s sociologically-informed perspective of community members exercising their agency to the ends of social control through self-organization (see also Janowitz 1970), a process he had experienced in small town America

(Snodgrass 1976).^{iv} He believed that such control and social cohesion might be achieved without recourse to a form of social order maintained from above enabled by a combination of coercive agents of the state and the ameliorative impact of the trained social worker, even though the roles of these social actors and their respective agencies were recognized as important. It is also worth noting the reference to the unintentional, negative consequences of repressive systems and practices of justice, a phenomenon of what later would be called the “amplification of deviance” (Wilkins 1964). This innovative use of the “curbside counselor” reflected the more progressive side of the Chicago School’s sociological imagination,^v especially as Shaw voiced his frustrations with a project funded by a local ruling-class wont to undo or oppose many of the urban reforms that threatened their class interests:

“Why should anyone object if they are delinquent? It might be an excellent thing if the delinquents did make organized raids on the Gold Coast. There may be only one way to settle things, that is, by organized power. That seems to be the way it works now” (Snodgrass 1976:16).

(ii) New York’s Street Club Project:

Following the CAP, a similar effort was made in the 1950’s in New York City as part of the detached street worker movement^{vi} to curb the rise of street gangs through social rehabilitation. Officially known as the “Street Club Project” (n.b. the term “gang” is omitted) under the management and leadership of the New York City Youth Board, in 1960 the agency published a detailed summation of its work in a text called “Reaching the Fighting Gang.” The publication is an unusual social scientific undertaking by a city bureaucracy to present a detailed account of the intervention that might act as a model for others, including copious field notes, transcribed interviews with youth, reports on the recruitment and training of project workers. The stated goals of the intervention reflected the social worker emphasis of

the day, i.e., to bring such “delinquent” or “maladjusted” youth who were self-organizing into a more productive relationship with mainstream institutions and norms through social inclusion, functioning as a form of harm reduction. This would be done through: (i) engaging street gang members in their own communities, (ii) building a relationship of mutual trust especially with gang leaders, and (iii) using these relationships to help mitigate and/or forestall inter-gang conflicts, introduce alternative pathways to delinquency, mediate relations between the groups and the community and generally arrive at a more empathetic understanding of gang-involved youth and their habitus (Bourdieu 1990)^{vii} than was typical of media and establishment stereotypes.

Conceptually important was the Youth Board’s framework in which gangs were perceived along a continuum of peer groups or street corner societies (Whyte 1943) according to their anti-social propensity. In this schema, the least delinquent of the youth (described as a “loose association of friends”) were those congregating in a particular space (often a street corner candy store) without much organizational structure. A second group was like the first only with a further common interest, e.g., an association with a local basketball or baseball team in which all the group’s members participated. The third type was the conflict group or “fighting gang,” the main focus of the intervention, and which emerged from one of the former “primary peer group formations” (1960:15). Finally, the fourth group was a “thoroughly delinquent and pathological grouping” (1960:16), usually made up of 4 to 6 members, often appearing as a clique within a larger group that was considered “impossible to work with”

(p.16).^{viii} Thus, it was the fighting gang that was of primary concern to the Youth Board and promised the greatest chance of both individual and collective transformation. As the eminent social psychologist, Glueck, opined in the book's introduction (1960: xvi):

"It was assumed that the adolescent member of the street gang as human being could be reached and would respond to sympathy, affection, and understanding when approached by adults who possessed these characteristics and could reach out to them on their own level. This type of relationship developed between an adult worker and a street club would serve as a catalytic agent for modifying anti-social attitudes and behavior and could be used to help the individual member begin to meet his needs in more positive ways."

Whilst in the United States North-East there were mostly high expectations of this model on the West Coast there was criticism, with some arguing that such attention to gangs would only see their cohesiveness increase (Klein 1971, 1966). This critique of the detached street worker program gained traction within juvenile justice circles and by the mid-1970s during society's punitive turn (Feeley and Simon 1992) and the growing belief that "nothing works" (Madison 1972, cf. Miller 1989) there remained few if any programs like those of New York City. By the 1980s, with the ascendancy of neo-conservative world leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher amid the "crack attack" (Reinarman and Levine 1997) and the U.S. war on drugs, models of gang control almost exclusively based on eradication and repression were introduced (Greene and Pranis 2007). Such a diminution of "soft" social control policies reflected the neo-liberal appetite for punishing the poor (Gans 1995, Young 1999, 2014) with New York City a testing ground (e.g., "zero tolerance) for methods of imposing the new social order (Fitch 2002, Harvey 2007, Vitale 2009).

(iii) Eddie Ellis, Freire and the "Warrior Spirit."

Against this background Ellis declared his vision of the street worker intervention in what is now known as the credible messenger model. As he and his imprisoned confederates contemplated ways to use their insider-knowledge of the system against the forces condemning their communities to criminogenic conditions, he rejected the simplistic, rational-choice paradigm that youth and adults were making bad decisions based on their compromised moral reasoning, lack of social bonds or pathological upbringing stemming from a culture inherited from slavery (Moynihan 1965). Rather, he saw “criminals” as the outcome of intersecting micro and macro forces and contradictions that comprised the “crime-generative factors” (Goodman and Smith 1997) intrinsic to the “symbiotic” environments where they lived. As Ellis observed, the one institution missing from the usual list of socializing agents when analyzing the high rates of criminal offending was the prison:

“...there is a direct connection...between the community and the prison. Communities are served by three or four fundamental institutions: served by schools, served by labor, by the church and the hospital and the prison. We often...recognize the church, and the school, and the hospital because they are physically located in the community... But the prisons, no less than the hospitals, are an institution which serves the community, with over 75% of prisoners coming from these communities, and more importantly, returning to these communities upon completion of their sentences” (Goodman and Smith 1997).

During this epochal shift to the penal state (Wacquant 2001), mass incarceration (Alexander 2010) and the norms of governing through crime (Simon 2006), Ellis pointedly rejected the pathological prescriptions for juvenile and adult crime propounded by the “experts” in criminology and criminal justice. Rather, he saw the other side of the paradigm of social and cultural deficits that kept the poor trapped in a self-destructive cycle: young people with strengths and potential yet to be realized, or as he put it:

“The best and the brightest and the smartest and the toughest of our young people are in prisons...And I say that they’re the best because I think that they made some very

serious decisions about their lives, about the way that they wanted to live their lives, and they have rejected I think the idea that they will allow the social and economic conditions to beat them down. So, what they did is to defy the law, they became outlaws...in them you see a warrior spirit, a spirit of rebellion, a spirit of resistance, but it's misguided spirit. A spirit that's very destructive, an anti-social spirit and it's the kind of energy, that instead of blossoming into something magnificent, has turned inward in a very pathological kind of way. And has been at the same time, self-destructive as well as destructive of the community around us" (Greaves 1997).

But going beyond and against the usual remedies for youth delinquency, from pastoral notions of opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin 1960) to current repressive programs seeking to change individuals' "criminal thinking" (Fader 2013) or state-based interventions that privilege deterrence, Ellis's thinking and practice were concerned with consciousness, ideology and pedagogy - in the cause of both collective and individual emancipation and empowerment. His understanding of the CM and its transformative possibilities lay in its counter-hegemonic implementation and interpretation. This understanding flowed from his leadership experience in a demonized radical social movement for whom social change came organically from the community mobilization and direct action in a struggle for power. For Ellis, transformation of the self had to: (i) be linked to community change and (ii) be seen and/or judged in its relationship to a new class-based praxis. A theoretical guiding light in this endeavor was the critical pedagogical thought of Paulo Freire:

"Gray: You use Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a general framework. What makes his work resonate with you?"

Ellis: His "education for liberation" model is an entirely different concept than the U.S. school system, which is designed to create literate ruling and upper classes and oppressed working and lower classes. Freire said people must be educated in a way that lets them understand the nature of their circumstances and why they are in the positions they are in...The traditional education system is a hierarchy with the teacher at the top and the student at the bottom. Freire says that relationship has to be replaced by a partnership and a dialogue between teacher and student, because the student may have

experiences the teacher doesn't... It allows the teacher to realize, "I don't have all the answers." The formerly incarcerated also have lessons to teach us."

Ellis essentially saw the CM's potential for: (i) a transformation of self and social consciousness through conscientization^{ix}; and (ii) a dialectical interplay between individuals, their families, and the community that enhanced social change through solidarity, healing, and reciprocity. This view is consistent with much of his earlier political training and ideology and accords with his later life's work in developing social justice programs for the Black community.^x

Credible Messengers and Anti-Violence Interventions in the Age of Neo-Liberalism

In most interpretations of the contemporary CM there is little of this radical imagination found in the conceptualization of Ellis. Under the impact of neo-liberal ideology with its emphases on market solutions for social problems, individual-based skills development, the natural logics of self-interest (i.e., rational choice) and a denial of the relationship between direct and indirect violence (Salmi 1993), juvenile justice programs, policies and interventions have consistently omitted the possibilities of structural change through forms of agency from below while the state and its agents could work on behalf of the vast majority rather than the interests of the elites. As Cox (2017:164) concludes, after conducting a recent study of New York's Juvenile Justice System:

"We must craft political solutions for serious youth offending that actually transform existing social structural inequalities and relationships rather than preserving them... We should not treat the intervention into the crime as the cure or reforms to the police and punitive state as the solution, but instead we should boost the potential of the state to enact social good through the infusion and redistribution of resources to individuals whose growth depends on those resources."

In the following, I describe two of the most popular such interventions linked to neo-liberal agendas. The first model, Cure Violence (CV), said to be running in 18 countries (cureviolence.org) started in the United States just over 20 years ago. The second program, Group Violence Intervention (GVI), is also a product of the United States and also found in multiple countries with its origins a few years before CV. Both are analyzed and compared in the following sections.

(i) Curing Violence and its Depoliticization

The program of CV was founded in 2000 in Chicago by the epidemiologist Gary Slutkin and is based on a public health model of treating diseases “derived from a synthesis of the fields of epidemiology, infectious diseases, behavioral science, social psychology, and neuroscience” (Slutkin, Ransford and Decker 2015). According to Slutkin, a former leader of the World Health Organization, violence needs to be treated like a disease that is contagiously passed on through social norms practiced by high- and at-risk members of a community prone to violent acts, mimicking other epidemics like TB or HIV. As Slutkin, et al write:

“It is now scientifically clear that violence behaves like a contagious and epidemic disease [11]. Violence meets the dictionary definition of disease (characteristic signs and symptoms causing morbidity and mortality [14]) and of contagious (transmissible, causing more of itself [11]). Violence also exhibits the population and individual characteristics of contagious epidemics—clustering, geo-temporal spreading, and person-to-person transmission [Slutkin, Ransford and Zvetina 2018].¹

In this classic public health framing of the violence phenomenon, Slutkin’s answer is to change those social norms that form the cycles and processes of the disease’s

¹ I am indebted to my colleague David Porteus for highlighting the uncritical positivistic scientism of this work.

transmission. Hence, what is required to reduce community violence is to collectively adopt new forms of interaction and conflict resolution through social actors called Violence Interrupters (VI). These are social agents employed to intervene and break typical violence sequences, e.g., attack and retaliation, by directly appealing to the potential perpetrators and “talk them down.” In addition, outreach workers (OW) are recruited to reach out to the broader community, disseminating messages of non-violence with the aim of creating a collective culture and social consensus of peaceful co-existence that can produce a “positive epidemic”:

“In this way, the CV model works at both ends of the spectrum of behavioral transmission: to both the senders and the receivers of social messages related to violence and the acceptance of violence” (Butts, Gouvis, Bostwick, and Porter, 2015).

What could be objectionable about this common sense, yet scientific, project that is answering the community’s call to: (i) to reduce inter-personal and inter-group violence; (ii) build a culture of non-violence; and (iii) allow the community to heal from its trauma? On the surface this intervention appears rational, progressive and humanistic but a closer look at its theoretical, discursive frames and practices points to the need for a more critical interpretation.

Riemann (2019) argues that these scientific truth claims (or truth regimes in Foucauldian parlance) used to justify and legitimate the intervention does so by eschewing any alternative (sociological) analysis of violence and its reproduction. He points out that the intervention is: (i) primarily based on data collection and analysis guided by methodological individualism, and (ii) almost exclusively reserved for poor Black and Latino neighborhoods that are pathologically designated “contagion zones.” Through the model’s medicalizing gaze, he continues, the

problem of violence is seen as largely a non-White phenomenon, while silencing a community's history and/or structural context accomplishing what Tuck (2009) calls "damage-centered research." Such research by focusing solely on the binaries of victims and victimizers removes any complex understanding of the histories of social change and community members desire for a more livable (Willen 2021), self-determined environment.

Thus, while the attention to the problem is framed as enlightened, non-repressive and promoting forms of community activism, it serves to reproduce the processes of many colonizing projects aimed at "saving" damaged, disorganized or dysfunctional communities (Platt 1969). Through the guise of a class and race-free intervention, now increasingly legitimated by the gold standard practice of "evidence-based research," this incursion into such communities continues while little or no such research is undertaken on the powerful.

The consequence, Riemann concludes, is that far from being well-reasoned and -intentioned responses to the seemingly intractable problem of violence such interventions, achieve the remarkable feat of depoliticizing the very nature and causes of the problem. In so doing, it also pathologizes and further racializes the communities in question. Thus, with the emphasis on notions of transmissibility and the contagion effect, structural conditions become relegated to some vague inter-mediate influence as in the following:

"... in most contagious processes, not all persons exposed express the clinical condition of violent behavior, as there are factors that influence uptake—in particular, proximity, dose, and age. Other factors, such as poverty, poor education, and family structure, should be understood as modulating factors [12]. ...These processes, whereby persons exposed to violence are at heightened risk for perpetration of violence, are thought to be responsible for contagions of child abuse, intimate partner violence, street violence, suicide, mass shootings, riots, and terrorism [27]. These types of violence should be understood as syndromes of the same disease process that differ by context" (Slutkin, Ransford and Zvetina 2018).

So, what of the good deed aspect of this model? For Riemann, this is all a neo-liberal ruse and the outcome of a medicalized discourse that obscures a form of neo-liberal paternalism in which inferior colonized subjects continue to be managed and controlled while the social order with its addiction to war (Melman 1983), technologies of repression (Foucault 1977, 2007) and wealth concentration (Piketty 2014, Harvey 2007) is successfully normalized and remains unchallenged. ^{xi}Meanwhile, what about the ongoing moral, intellectual and occupational careers of the CMs so instrumental to the program? What does the model have in store for these critical community agents outside of their utilitarian value as instruments of the “scientific” project?

According to the literature it appears very little, typical of colonizing interpretations of social science and its extractivist tendencies (Smith 1999). Meanwhile what happens to the knowledge of the intervention? To whom does it belong? While CV maintains that it does not work with law enforcement it still produces significant data bases of risk-prone individuals that can be used by state agents and agencies, given the omnipresence of the surveillance state in CV’s where human rights guarantees are questionable.

In sum, such contradictions are inevitable in this natural scientific experiment where there is no room for other epistemologies (Santos 2018) outside of a Western positivistic one, nor any sociological or even moral critiques of the state and its agents both of whom, whether consciously or otherwise, protect and reproduce the very power asymmetries responsible (i.e., the root causes)^{xii} for the poverty, denial of resources and segregation that characterize all the sites where the model is introduced.

(ii) Ceasing Fire and Embracing the State

The second model, known as Group Violence Intervention (GVI), is similarly grounded in neo-liberal ideology, using an approach to violence prevention that conforms to praxes of administrative criminology (Young 1986). This is a conservative approach to crime during the 1980s, in which the traditional emphasis on the causes of crime was replaced with a focus on the impact of crime and making the criminal justice system more efficient (Clarke 1980). The focused deterrence model, practiced by GVI, is an example of this since it rejects a root causes approach that implies the need to *“fix everything: the economy, the schools, health care, the families, the culture...You can’t do it”* (Kennedy 2011:276).

Since the model obviates structural explanations for crime that begins with the class and racial nature of society and its capitalistic foundations its theoretical frame arcs towards a more Hobbesian (Brotherton 2015) conception of violence and society. This is demonstrated through its efforts to restrain or remove pathologized groups and individuals by agents and the machinery of an untheorized state.^{xiii} Unlike CV, however, with its exclusive rationale based on the unreflexive practices of “hard” science, some of its theoretical premises are drawn from sociology and criminology although any mention of political economy, ideology, culture or history are avoided. Hence, while core sociological concepts such as informal forms of social control are included, there is no consideration of structural determinants in the production and reproduction of societal violence, ensuring a form of theoretical and analytical elision - much like the approach of CV.

Borrowing from the early Chicago School, the model argues that while legal sanctions and agents of the law who enforce them create formal social control, it is the level of organization within the community (through its schools, religious institutions, neighborhood

clubs and associations, unions etc.) that maintain peaceful social relations and interactions. However, when these informal social controls are not in place, crime and violence ensue with social groups emerging to regulate society such as street gangs. Like CV, the neighborhoods selected in this model are mired in poverty and inhabited by people of color, mostly Blacks and Latinos. The gang groups are uniformly seen as anti-social, complete with systems of hierarchical authority with leaders who control the violence. Nonetheless, its members are mostly rational and not the stereotypical sociopaths, as discovered by some crime “experts” (see Bennett, Diliulio and Waters 1996). However, “based on empirical evidence” (produced primarily by the police) it is but a small percentage of individuals in these groups who commit the largest share of the violence^{xiv} (also claimed in the 1950’s NYC intervention), and these must be contained and/or removed from the highly stressed environment.

To regulate the violence, therefore, the restoration of the moral authority of the community is required. The decision to engage or not to engage in violence is based on: (i) one’s rational assessment of the situation, (ii) the reality of legal consequences (i.e., deterrence theory – see Kennedy 2009), (iii) threats made against such persons from other gang members, (iv) the need to exert violence to control territory (market and spatial), and (v) the tolerance of the community for this behavior. While this concept of groups consisting of rational actors seems reasonable and measured it ignores concepts of power and powerlessness in their everyday lives (Swaner 2022). Neither does it advance any discussion of the local political economy which unites these informal and formal economies of capitalism and settler colonialism through the banking system and the interlocking-systems of disinvestment and

police containment, hallmark policies of neo-liberal governments (Young 1999, Harvey 2007, Wacquant 2001).

In terms of the model's goals, they are similar to CV in that they focus on: (i) increasing the level of public safety; (ii) reducing intra-community violence carried out predominantly by groups (i.e., gangs); and (iii) restoring community cohesion/health after high levels of trauma and "various harms." But a fourth goal, increasing the legitimacy of the police, the state and the rule of law, is both a focus and a strategy from which CV distances itself.

The methods employed by both models are also alike but for GVI promoters, CV limits itself to primarily the street outreach component that it borrowed from GVI's original "Boston architecture" (Kennedy 2011:92). Thus, GVI claims to engage in a more ambitious and far-reaching intervention. This is achieved by first identifying the major sources of violence and then creating a "strategic alliance" between law enforcement, probation personnel and community leaders (usually religious), which combine to "pull the levers" on the processes and patterns of localized violent trauma.

A third major difference lies with GVI's emphasis on the "carrot and stick approach," known as call-ins. In this "innovative" strategy, targeted gang members are invited to appear at meetings with members of the "strategic alliance" where they are given a choice to halt the processes of violence (i.e., "don't shoot") or suffer the consequences. If they agree to comply, they are rewarded with help in looking for work and various other social service benefits^{xv} but if they refuse their daily lives are made intolerable (i.e., close surveillance from combined law enforcement agencies leading to reimprisonment). In GVI's narrative, when given the choice gang members, counter-intuitively, agree to curtail their violent behavior, taking an "honorable

exit.” This is not solely because of the sanctions they face but because they too have “had enough.” As Kennedy (2011:282) tells it:

“Who’s winning?”

Nobody.

Nobody’s winning. This is not good for anybody. Nobody likes it.”

There are two other differences not included in the CV model. The first is the establishment of a police intelligence unit attached to the intervention that gathers and analyzes data to enhance its impact. The second is the recruitment of social scientists, especially in social network analysis, who work with law enforcement for the purpose of undermining activities of the targeted group(s).

Fundamentally, the model is punitive (Vitale 2017, Hayden 2004) relying on the enforcement properties of the state, notwithstanding the fact that its legitimacy under present race, class and gendered systems of power may be questioned by many in the community where the intervention takes place.^{xvi} In addition, like CV, the focus of the intervention is primarily in residential areas where the presumption of violence is seen as an internal problem separate from those external and historical forces that somehow belong to the “root causes” paradigm.

“Its (GVI – author) infinitely less complicated than the traditional root cause story that we have to fix everything to fix crime: the economy, the schools, health care, the families, the culture. That idea still has a lot of appeal to a lot of people, but it comes with a nagging and obvious problem You can’t do it” (Kennedy 2011:270).

Hence, both CV and GVI resort to a form of pathological thinking that traces back to slavery, eugenics, Jim Crow and elite notions of the “dangerous classes” (Muhammad 2010, Hinton 2018, Hinton and Cook 2020). For all their critiques of inequality, their domain

assumptions lie firmly within mainstream paradigms of societal power arrangements with little consideration given to histories from below (Zinn 2005), complicating dominant narratives that frame their interventions as efforts to bring peace through community transformation, healing and reconciliation. This avoidance or rejection of most critical scholarship (particularly around concepts of social class) fails to examine how “Others” are created ideologically in historically grounded periods and socially reproduced. These felt processes of exclusion and vindictiveness cannot be simply dismissed as the work of conspiracy think, “race talk” or abstract root cause reasoning. Rather, they should be a fundamental premise of any such intervention as part of a commitment to understand: (i) how the power of such beliefs has become common sense and (ii) why they resonate so powerfully throughout the U.S.’s history of racial, class and gendered subordination such that they become the basis for both collective guilt and punishment.^{xvii} As Kennedy recognizes, this obsession with powerful Black and Latino male bodies is used as a mythic threat to dehumanize communities and create a subspecies haunting our “inner-cities.” But these are not just wrong perceptions by one group of another, rather they are rooted in class and racial dynamics and stereotypes that prefigure and structure our entire corporate capitalist project (Marable 2000).

Thus, instead of an intervention that stymies the ongoing processes of racialized moral panics, these models do the opposite with their denial of the plausibility of radical societal or community change, leaving targeted communities with little more than the restoration of the status quo. Once more it is the catch-all phrases of “at-risk” and “violence-prone” individuals, groups and spaces that work their Hobbesian magic in GVI while it is concepts like the “contagion effect” that enables its scientific legitimacy in the vocabulary of CV.

Discussion

To continue with Ellis's conception means that crime and violence cannot be understood outside of the history of capitalism, colonialism and imperial expansion and their myriad powers to shape communities large and small. While there are many types of violence, including inter-personal violence, which is usually the focus of anti-violence models of intervention described above, and structural violence, which is usually left to market forces, policymakers and the struggles between labor and capital, it is crucial to see the intrinsic relationship between the two. It is upon this system of exploitation of both labor and nature that our apparatuses of criminal and juvenile justice and imperial policing (Schneider 2019) are built (Robinson 1983). These communities mired in inter-generational poverty, high crime and violence rates and exponential levels of incarceration are a direct result of these structures of oppression and repression and are not merely their unintentional consequences.

While outside society continues to pathologize and criminalize these communities, it is precisely from these neighborhoods that solutions to crime and violence emerge, with Ellis' messengers working to help system-involved youth transition to a positive life-course as but one example. But his vision of the combined, dialectical impact of individual and social transformation from within has been replaced by the seductive notion that certain communities have to be "fixed" and/or "cured" from without. Thus, instead of Ellis's radically informed imagination of the complex, holistic change process, we are offered a set of prescribed social interventions perfectly in line with the now dominant containment ideology as part of a new manufacturing of consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that communities and state agencies are beginning to demand more from their anti-violence agendas and hence the mushrooming adoption of the credible messenger model now taking on so many different forms. However, will these versions incorporate the need for structural change as part of their overall conception, in line with Ellis's framework of cognitive liberation and praxis? This is a critical question for all anti-violence activists and practitioners to reflexively engage in order not to succumb to the impossibilism so dominant in criminal and juvenile justice discourses (Miller 1996). If we really want to help release that "warrior spirit" of system-impacted youth, as Ellis envisioned, now is not the time to be accommodating.

Conclusion:

The original idea of the credible messenger intervention in the "Progressive Era" was based on an understanding that social ("gang") violence" was intrinsically linked to conditions of poverty and best addressed by non-police forces. However, as Muhammad (2010) concluded, when the gang was considered "white" it was met with redistribution and compassion but when the gang is seen as a "black problem" it is met with retribution and repression.

These condemnations of the Other are implicated in many current interpretations of the CM and other anti-violence models that contrary to their advertised intentions serve to enhance the power of the security and surveillance state over society's most under-resourced communities while failing to advance any grounded critique of the very structural factors (e.g. carcerality, state violence and corporate capitalism) that are basic causes of a community's fragility. Furthermore, the uncritical, non-reflexive involvement of social science in many of

these interventions essentially compromise the independence of scholars and uses the methods of social science for social control ends to manage marginalized populations within a neo-liberal paternalistic praxis thereby reproducing social oppression and subjugation. Moreover, the popularity of these interventions effectively diverts society from looking at more authentic and critical interpretations of social change that begin with community, collective and individual empowerment, and transformation.^{xviii}

I argue, therefore, that these contemporary interventions distract society's gaze from the historical roots of violence which have become brutally apparent with widely condemned cases of systematic police brutality and corporate state violence. Thus, they continue to reproduce colonizing frames of community control and change, further pathologizing grassroots notions and practices of self-organization and autonomy under the guise of public safety. By condemning already highly surveilled and criminalized populations to further police state intervention, the threats of capitalist gentrification and social cleansing are enhanced, and the more transformational potential of the CM condemned to the dustbin of an idealistic past. Fortunately, there are several interventions that conceive their realities differently, where "root causes" are not elided nor silenced and the CM still represents the possibilities of transcendence which Ellis radically imagined.^{xix}

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Notes:

ⁱ The author and colleagues describe TM as a: "holistic and dialogical process predicated on the multi-level development of the individual (intellectual, emotional, physical, moral and social) buttressed by socio-economic, political and cultural supports provided by the family, the community and the state. It is, therefore, the positive transformation of youth, with empowerment and cognitive liberation at both the individual and collective levels contributing to the healing processes of traumatized communities as well as the potential well-spring of their own self-transformation." (Brotherton, Kessler, Rodrigo, Kontos and Muhammad Forthcoming).

ⁱⁱ To be specific, it came from the "resurrection" study group which became the Think Tank at Greenhaven Penitentiary established in 1979 by former Director of Community Relations for the New York City Black Panther Party, Eddie Ellis. At the time Ellis was serving a life sentence for a fabricated murder charge which grew out of the COINTELPRO Program.

ⁱⁱⁱ Describing the CAP, Snodgrass (1976:17) notes that although for the first time this sociologically imagined community project tied delinquency to the ecological characteristics of urban areas rather than the cultural traits of urban immigrants it assiduously avoided any intervention against capitalist industry which "proceeded without hindrance."

^{iv} Shaw (1929:8) insisted, "it is necessary to understand the culture – the more general social norms, the local community, the family, the gang, and other social groups in terms of traditions, sentiments, and attitudes of each group; and the relationship in which the person stands in each."

^v For, as Snodgrass (1976:17) commented, "...the concentration on internal organization and neglect of the political and economic realities of slum residents stems from the fact that there was less concern with rights and welfare than with behavior control, less concern with community prosperity than with community constraint."

^{vi} The detached street worker concept stems from the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in New York during the 1840's and the missionary work of T.H. Tarlton among (mostly) poor young men of the city. The idea was to form a "dialogical" relationship with young people and to meet them where they are (see Tiffany 2003).

^{vii} Bourdieu (1990:53) described the habitus as: "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends."

^{viii} This belief that only a very small number of gang members are responsible for most of the violence is a key tenet of the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model, discussed later (see Kennedy 2011).

^{ix} Freire described conscientization (1977:15) as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality."

^x The Center for NuLeadership (NuLeadership.org) is the inheritor of Ellis's philosophy where: "Human Rights are all the things that people need for healthy and thriving lives...including safe and clean housing, equitable access to land and resources, pro-human healthcare, truthful education, and more. Human Development is the ability of people to create the social and cultural conditions to flourish free from oppression and to create a world where Human Rights are woven into the fabric of society."

^{xi} This is not far removed from the socio-biological praxes that Gould (1981) wrote about in his treatise on the (mis)measurement of man (sic.).

^{xii} As Muhammad (2010) and Hinton and Cook (2021: 2.18) have argued: "The incremental incorporation of low-level crime management...from the 1970s and 1990s must be understood as the culmination, rather than the beginning, of a decades-long carceral-security feedback loop of crime prevention and police counterinsurgency tactics that were first deployed domestically against black radicals and revolutionary activists and later used to crack down on "superpredators" and police reported crime and disorder at the turn of the twenty-first century."

^{xiii} This theory is not dissimilar from a prior theory called "selective incapacitation" courtesy of the Rand Corporation (Greenwood and Abrahamse 1982).

^{xiv} "Group members typically make up around half a percent of a city's population but are involved in as much as 70 percent of its homicide and gun violence" (<https://nnscommunities.org/strategies/group-violence-intervention/>).

^{xv} Vitale (2017:203) comments on this approach: "The social services offered tend to be very thin, involving some counseling and recreational opportunities but rarely access to actual jobs or advanced educational placement. Life skills and socialization classes do nothing to create real opportunities for people, instead reinforcing an ethos of "personal responsibility" that often ends up blaming the victims for their unemployment and educational failure in communities that are poor, underserved, segregated, and dangerous."

^{xvi} As Forman (2017) argued, while community residents might want more social control they also demanded increased basic resources to make life livable.

^{xvii} In a controversial article in the Nation on GVI the author argues that "There's little research on the focused deterrence model's long-term impact on violence, and the research that does exist is mixed. And the model's reliance on collective punishment risks incarcerating large numbers of young people." Kennedy responded with a spirited defense of GVI (see Rivin-Nadler 2018).

^{xviii} An example of "insider" proposals to address violence see "Invest in Black Futures: A Public Health Roadmap for Safe NYC Neighborhoods" (Brooklyn Movement Center 2022).

^{xix} Three models that do not deny root causes in their work are: Advance Peace (<https://www.advancepeace.org/>), CM3 (<https://cm3.splashthat.com/>) and GuGro (www.gugro.org).