Everyday Courage

Way, Niobe

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Introduction

A feared and seemingly ineradicable stereotype, the urban teen—pregnant, drug-addicted, violent, fatherless, welfare dependent, poor, black, and uneducated—is alive and well in the public’s mind. The opposite side of this cliché is the somewhat rare though equally reductive urban teen who has risen up against the greatest of odds to become a highly successful entertainer, athlete, doctor, or lawyer. These contrasting images reside in our imagination, our daily newspapers, weekly magazines, popular books, and professional journals, and are accepted as the totality of urban teenage experience. This book, however, is about neither of these stark images. It is neither about adolescents who kill for cash, smoke crack, roam the streets, and wreak havoc on the world, nor about those who have overcome tremendous adversity to reach great heights of success. Instead, this book is about the urban poor and urban working-class adolescents we rarely hear about—those who live under oppressive conditions yet do not necessarily provide titillating stories for fiction writers or journalists. These teenagers do, however, offer us critical insights into what it means to be an adolescent in the 1990s. This book is about the 95 to 98 percent of urban teens who are neither murderers nor superheroes, and are not typically featured on the evening news.
Among the adolescents described in this book, some do eventually drop out of school or become teenage parents, while others are honor students or stars on the high school basketball team. All of them, however, are persevering, striving, trying to make the best of their difficult circumstances. They are not necessarily invulnerable or particularly remarkable—they are ordinary and courageous teenagers growing up in urban areas of America, and they have a lot to tell us.

This book is about the everyday courage of girls like Eva, an African American girl, who says in her sophomore year in high school:

I’m not like normal people. If you see a pencil—if you put this pencil on the table, you’ll see a pencil and accept it. I’ll go around and say, “Yeah, I see a pencil, but why is the pencil there and who put it there.” Most people would just see a pencil: “So what? A pencil,” like that. That’s how I go about solving problems, too. You know, that’s it.

This book is about the stories that urban teens tell about themselves and about their relationships, beliefs, values, experiences, and lives. It is about the mundane as well as the exciting. It is about adopting Eva’s curiosity about the world and investigating what it is like to be a poor or working-class teenager growing up in urban America in the 1990s.

This book is also about Sonia, a Puerto Rican girl, who reflects as follows in her junior year of high school:

I feel I always have an image to put up because I think a lot of people have talked so bad about Spanish people. You know, that they get pregnant too soon, they’re all on welfare . . . and that’s where I come in. It’s like I don’t want people to think that about me. ’Cause, you know, I am gonna make it far and I’m not gonna let anything stop me. ’Cause if I do, then I’d get, “Oh look, what we all talked about was true.” I’m gonna go to college. I’m gonna have a career set for myself and then I’ll think about making a family.

It is about the oppression that ethnic minority youth face on a daily basis, the stereotypes that pervade their lives, and their motivation and persistence to overcome such obstacles.

But haven’t we heard enough about urban teens? From Jonathan Kozol’s acclaimed Amazing Grace to Alex Kotlowitz’s There Are No Children Here, there has been an outpouring of journalistic accounts of the
lives of urban children and adolescents. Michael Massing noted this phenomenon recently in the *New Yorker*:

> The inner city, a subject long neglected by journalists, is suddenly in vogue. So many writers, photographers, and documentary film makers are heading out to housing projects and street corners that it’s a wonder they don’t trip over one another. Their output from the last year alone would fill a small depository.

These reports “from the front” have documented the trials of growing up poor in desolate, devastated, urban neighborhoods, and of being an ethnic minority in a racist, classist, and uncaring society. Such accounts powerfully reveal the traumas experienced by urban youth. However, by focusing on the harrowing and the shocking, they commonly ignore or downplay the regularity of these teens’ daily lives. These accounts are not concerned with how urban poor or working-class adolescents understand their worlds over time: how they perceive themselves, their relationships with parents and peers, their futures, their school, and the larger society, and how these perceptions change or stay the same as they go through adolescence. The research upon which this book is based addresses these gaps in our knowledge of urban teenagers. I sought to learn about adolescence by listening to urban youth speak about their lives.

As a developmental psychologist counseling and conducting research with urban teenagers in the Boston and New York City public schools over the past eleven years, I have listened to hundreds of adolescents from poor or working-class families speak about their worlds. As I listened, it became clear that their perspectives cannot be neatly summarized in the ways offered by either journalists or academics. Adjectives or categories like “hopeless,” “optimistic,” “present oriented,” “violent,” or “impulsive” simply do not suffice. As Eva suggests, the lives of urban teens are intricate, subtle, and rich, filled with contradictions, ambiguities, and continuities. Their stories, like all of our stories, are messy and out of control, and, at the same time, carefully gauged, in control, passionate, and provocative. There are no definitive boundaries within which their perspectives or stories neatly fit. I also began to understand, while listening to these teens, that they do not spend every waking minute confronting violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy, welfare, gangs, and single-headed households. Their lives are as complex and multilayered as their views. Their biggest concern
on a given day may be, as it is perhaps for their suburban counterparts, whether they will go to the prom, or whether their math test will be difficult. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I began to understand that, in contrast to what many developmental psychologists have suggested, the stories of urban adolescents are as important to our theories of adolescence as are the stories from their mostly white, middle-class, suburban peers. There are few studies, however, that elicit from urban teens their personal worldviews, and rarely have researchers examined their perspectives over time. This book presents findings from a three-year longitudinal research study of twenty-four urban adolescents from low-income families. During this period, I systematically investigated how they perceived their worlds over time—in their own words and on their own terms.

More than a decade after Carol Gilligan noted in *In a Different Voice* that girls and women had been excluded from studies of human development, social scientists are now beginning to take note that urban poor and working-class and ethnic-minority adolescents have also been excluded from developmental studies. Almost 40 percent of all adolescents are from poor or working-class families, one-fifth live below the poverty line, and the majority of these poor or working-class youth live in urban areas. It is clear from these numbers that the worldview of this population will have a significant impact on our collective future. Yet as a recent article in the *American Psychologist* noted: “Neither research nor theory in the adolescent field has had much to say about young people growing up in poverty.” And the editors of a comprehensive book on adolescent development remarked: “Perhaps the most striking observation across all the chapters in this volume is the degree to which research on normal development has been restricted to middle-class whites.” Anthropologist Linda Burton and her colleagues likewise deplore that “a systematic exploration of what constitutes normal development among inner-city, economically disadvantaged, ethnic/racial minority teens has yet to appear in the adolescent development literature.” While interest in and research on adolescent development began at the beginning of the twentieth century, we are approaching the new millennium with little understanding of a large portion of the adolescent population.

The research on urban adolescents over the past two decades has focused almost exclusively on high-risk behavior such as teen pregnancy, school dropouts, drug use, gangs, violent and criminal behavior, or on related is-
sues such as sexual attitudes or behaviors (e.g., contraceptive use or frequency of sexual activity). As with most of the research on ethnic-minority adolescents, the research examining urban adolescents has centered almost exclusively on individual deviancy or social problems. Urban poor and working-class, and ethnic-minority adolescents have been and continue to be described as “deprived, disadvantaged, deviant, disturbed, [and] or dumb.”

Over the past decade, however, psychologists and educators have begun challenging these pathological representations of low-income populations, ethnic-minority children and adolescents, and of urban adolescents. Disputing the negative images of black adolescents, Patricia Bell-Scott and Ronald L. Taylor point out that “the majority of black youth stay in school, avoid drugs, premature marriage, childbearing, are not involved in crime or other forms of self-destructive behavior and grow up to lead normal and productive lives, in spite of social and economic disadvantages.” A similar assertion can be made about urban poor or working-class youth. The statistics repeatedly indicate that the majority of urban adolescents are not involved in high-risk behavior. Nationwide surveys compiled by the Children’s Defense Fund indicate that approximately 70 percent of twenty to twenty-five-year-olds from poor families (of various ethnicities) graduate from high school. This percentage is much higher than what many imagine after reading the many newspaper articles on urban dropouts. The percentage of those who are poor and who drop out of school is almost exactly the same as the percentage of poor adolescents who go on to college: in 1987, it was 27.7 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively. Yet we hear much about the former and little about the latter. If we do hear about the latter, they are described as the exceptions to the norm—the dropouts are never given such descriptions. These surveys also indicate that fewer than 20 percent of white, black, or Latino adolescents under the age of eighteen report using marijuana (white females report the highest and black females report the lowest percentage of use); fewer than 5 percent of white, black, or Latino youth report using cocaine (Latinos report the highest and blacks report the lowest percentage of use); fewer than 30 percent of white, black, or Latinos report using alcohol (whites report the highest and blacks, particularly black females, report the lowest percentage of use); and fewer than 3 percent of white, black, or Latino adolescents reported “serious” alcohol use (five or more drinks per occasion on five or more days in the past month). Furthermore, the 1990
national birthrate statistics for fifteen- to seventeen-year-old girls indicate that twenty-three in one thousand whites, eighty-four in one thousand blacks, and sixty-five in one thousand Hispanics gave birth. In other words, for every thousand girls in this age group, 977 white, 916 blacks, and 935 Hispanics did not become adolescent mothers. And yet the experiences of those nine out of ten girls are not reflected in the developmental research. High-risk behaviors, furthermore, frequently overlap: an illicit drug user is more likely to drop out of school than her or his non-using peers, just as a young mother is more likely to drop out of school than a girl who does not get pregnant. These percentages and the overlap between them suggest that far fewer than half of the entire inner-city poor and working-class, or black, Hispanic, or white adolescent population, are actively involved in high-risk behavior. In focusing almost exclusively on high-risk behavior, then, social scientists neglect the lives of over half of the adolescent population. While the research on high-risk behavior is undoubtedly important, there is a dearth of research on normative issues such as parent and peer relationships among urban youth—including those who are and those who are not involved in high risk behaviors. If we are truly interested in understanding adolescents, improving their lives, and helping them grow into productive and healthy adults, as the multitude of books and articles on teenagers suggest we are, then we must not only continue to examine the lives of middle-class adolescents from the suburbs but also begin to investigate the wide-ranging and disparate experiences of ethnically diverse, poor and working-class urban youth.

An additional limitation of the research on urban adolescents, and in fact on all adolescents, springs from the dominant methodology used to gather it. Research projects on adolescents have not, for the most part, asked their participants to describe their experiences in their own words. There has been an overreliance on methods that impose predetermined definitions and categories. True/false or multiple-choice questionnaires are useful in obtaining information as to how well the respondents fit into the categories set up by the scale; they are of less use in exploring the intricacies and subtleties of how individuals perceive, assign value to, and speak about different parts of their lives. Renowned developmental psychologists Urie Bronfenbrenner and Kurt Lewin assert that what matters in development is not only what exists in “objective reality” (i.e., concrete material and environmental conditions), but also how the environment is
perceived and constructed by the individuals in that environment.24 Although researchers may presume to know how urban adolescents perceive their worlds given the “objective reality” (e.g., a high crime, violence, and poverty rate) or developmental phase (i.e., adolescence), our assumptions may not reflect how this reality is actually perceived by the adolescents themselves. Certain assumptions about adolescents and “the adolescent experience” (e.g., the desire for separation from parents) pervade both the media and more academic representations of them. Yet, for the most part, we have neglected to check out many of these assumptions and, consequently, continue to perpetuate what may be myths about adolescents rather than knowledge based on their lived experiences. Listening to adolescents provides an essential window into their experience and allows us to build theories that are more reflective of their lives. Once we begin listening, our theories about adolescents—all adolescents—will likely be challenged and we will be forced to revise and expand what we think we know about them.

Recognizing the limitations in more quantitative approaches to research, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have recently been listening to adolescents, including those who are poor or working class.25 These qualitative researchers have gone to great lengths to avoid overly simplistic or reductionist portraits of the adolescents they study. Nevertheless, like the more quantitative studies, the majority of the qualitative studies on urban poor or working-class adolescents have concentrated either primarily or exclusively on populations involved in high-risk behavior or have focused on only one or two components of an adolescent’s world. Furthermore, few have taken a developmental approach.26 Studies such as Anne Campbell’s compelling exploration of gangs among adolescent girls, or Jay MacLeod’s wonderfully descriptive account of two groups of working-class boys, provide us with much-needed information about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of their participants and about the structural barriers that prevent them from reaching their dreams.27 These studies, however, do not provide us with an account of how adolescents perceive their worlds as they grow older, or of the nature of their intellectual and emotional evolution. Listening to a wide spectrum of adolescent girls and boys, as well as discerning how they perceive a wide variety of topics relevant to their daily lives (e.g., themselves, their relationships, their
school, the larger society, etc.) over time, is critical for a rich and full understanding of adolescence.

In my three-year longitudinal, qualitative study of twenty-four urban adolescents, I sought to explore their perspectives about many different aspects of their lives, to reveal the multifaceted nature of their lives, and to add their diverse voices to the research literature on adolescents. My questions were threefold: (1) What are the various ways in which urban adolescents perceive their worlds? (2) How do their perceptions change as they go through adolescence? and (3) How do their voices affect our understanding of adolescence as a critical phase in human development? I was intent on exploring areas that have rarely been examined by researchers studying urban youth in particular, and human psychological development in general.

Bronfenbrenner’s idea of what constitutes one’s world (one’s “ecological environment”) includes not only the home, school, and workplace, but also the larger society (the “overarching institutional patterns of the culture”) in which a person lives.\(^{28}\) I have incorporated this definition into my understanding of what makes up an adolescent’s world. I also owe a debt to Karsten Harries’s interpretation of Martin Heidegger’s conception of “world”:

“World” cannot mean the totality of facts. Think rather what we mean when we speak of the “world of the baseball player.” “World” here means not just bases and balls, ball parks and hotels, players and umpires . . . but first of all a mode of existing, a way in which the baseball player relates to things and persons and to himself.\(^ {29}\)

I aimed to listen to urban adolescents’ perceptions of how they relate to themselves, to family members, to peers, to important others, to institutions (such as school), and to the larger culture. I was less interested in the actual existence of certain conditions such as urban violence or poverty (which are the “totality of facts”) as I was in the adolescents’ “mode of existing” or “ways of relating” within these structural constraints. I investigated the ways in which a group of adolescents speak about their values; about what makes their lives worth living; about their futures; and, finally, about how they experience school and the society at large.\(^ {30}\) I did not attempt to produce separate findings with respect to each of these topics, but rather to detect themes that arose when these adolescents spoke about a
range of their experiences.

My research was driven by my desire to go beyond what Toni Morrison has called “the panoramic view”—the view put forth by the media and social science research. I wanted to learn more than what I had seen and been taught (e.g., that living in the inner city is dangerous and depressing). I wanted to listen to the voices and hear the experiences of adolescents growing up in poor, urban areas so that I might come to understand what their worlds “feel like and what they mean personally.” With this understanding, I hoped I would be better equipped to help these teenagers thrive.

The book is organized into eleven chapters. The first chapter, divided into two parts, presents the theories that inform my study. The first part focuses on the various philosophical, psychological, and feminist theories that have shaped both the research process and the outcomes of my study. The second part of the chapter discusses how these theories have created a practice of research. It is this practice of research that I have adopted in my own work. The second chapter provides details of the study: the teens involved in the study, the setting of the study, and the data-analytic techniques used to detect themes in their interviews. In the third chapter, I open the discussion of my findings with a case study of Malcolm, an adolescent boy. I devote a full chapter to Malcolm to establish and emphasize the individuality of the adolescents in the study before I discuss, in the later chapters, the common themes heard among them. In the following six chapters, I present common themes that I detected in the teens’ interviews. These themes are not always present across or within their stories; they surfaced in some interviews and were notably absent in others. Tracing each theme and its absence led me to identify smaller subthemes, tributaries that further complicated the overarching themes. These themes and subthemes are discussed at length in these six chapters. In the tenth chapter, I offer another story of a life in progress. This case study is of Eva, an adolescent girl. Once again, I attempt to underscore the singularity of the stories that the adolescents told me and my colleagues. In the epilogue, I discuss how the themes intersect and what questions they raise for our understanding of urban adolescents, adolescence, and more generally for the field of social science as a whole.

Before continuing, I want briefly to note what my book will not address. It does not provide an overview of the growing body of research on
urban poor, working-class, or ethnic-minority adolescents or any other group of adolescents. Numerous books and research reports have been written over the past decade that have summarized the research findings on these populations. I only make references to previous research when it relates directly to the themes that I detected in the interviews. Furthermore, my book does not present an overview of the cultural beliefs and attitudes among different ethnic groups except as they relate to the themes detected in the data. A problem with inserting homogenizing statements about “Puerto Rican families” or “African Americans” is that such assertions typically ignore the tremendous variations within ethnic and cultural groups. The history, immigrant status, family structure, economic opportunities, political orientation, and even individual personalities within the family will likely influence, for example, the cultural values of a Puerto Rican family. Yet the current fashion in the social sciences is to present global, undifferentiated statements about “Hispanic families” or “black families.” I will cautiously draw on such cultural stereotypes, for that is what they are, when I believe they add insight to a particular theme being discussed. In addition, due to the small number of teens from each ethnic group (e.g., only two Irish American students), I do not attempt to locate ethnic/race differences in the interviews. While ethnic/race differences were rarely suggested, it is impossible to determine whether that was the result of small numbers or a reflection of broader patterns. Also, I focus only on the adolescents’ perceptions. My study is not an ethnography of urban adolescent life. It simply explores the narratives of a group of urban youth over time. Finally, not all topics discussed in the interviews are presented in the book. While the adolescents spoke about their siblings, for example, these relationships are discussed only when they relate to the central themes. This book presents the themes that I discerned in the interview data rather than all the components of an adolescent’s life that may be important. Undoubtedly, the reader will note additional omissions or topics that are not adequately addressed in this book. However, I chose to address those topics that seemed most pressing when the teens in the study spoke about their worlds.