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Review of The Little Book of Police Youth Dialogue: A Restorative Path Toward Justice

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***The Little Book of Police Youth Dialogue: A Restorative Path Toward Justice.* Micah H. Johnson and Jeffrey Weisberg. 2021. New York: Good Books, paper, 128 pages. ISBN: 9781680997088, \$5.99.**

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These days conversations about policing in the United States tend to take place almost exclusively among politically like-minded individuals. Advocates of the Black Lives Matter movement shake their heads at each new example of excessive use of force by police, while backers of Blue Lives Matter express shock and repulsion at images of protesters disrespecting police, painting all police with the same broad brush. As a result of these tensions, I have found that it can be difficult to get students in a college classroom to discuss their perspectives on policing, especially when there is evidence of conflicting viewpoints. Imagine getting police and youth from disadvantaged communities of color to express their concerns openly and honestly in each other's presence! Yet such conversations are exactly what authors Micah E. Johnson and Jeffrey Weisberg suggest are needed in their new book *The Little Book of Police Youth Dialogue: A Restorative Path Toward Justice*.

The authors are not advocating for a new theory, additional research, or pie-in-the-sky platitudes about truth or justice. They are advocating for a *practice* that they have discovered to be transformative when done well. Weisberg himself has helped to facilitate many Police Youth Dialogues at the River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding in Gainesville, Florida. Indeed, the book skillfully draws on interviews with both police officers and disadvantaged youth who have participated in such dialogues in order to describe the transformative potential made possible when police and youth listen to each other in a safe and non-hierarchical environment. As the authors put it, "When voices exchange that are informed, respectful, and have equal authority, the voices become a chorus of truth and justice" (p. 7). The authors describe encounters in which youth discover that police are whole persons, many of whom themselves have experienced difficult experiences of trauma. Meanwhile, police officers are compelled to hear stories of law enforcement misconduct that can go a long way toward helping them understand some of the anger frequently directed at them. And this act of listening is far from passive. When done well, it can "provide a space where officers have the opportunity to *earn the trust* of those who have been repeatedly harmed by people wearing a uniform and a badge" (p. 76, italics mine).

As its title implies, the book moves quickly. After an introductory chapter, the book proceeds with a history of policing that emphasizes its roots in "lynch mobs and slave patrols," albeit without exploring the older history of immigrant policing and political machinery in urban contexts of the northern states. In this chapter and the two that follow, an attempt to contextualize policing, while certainly important, is perhaps a bit too sweeping in some of its claims. But subsequent chapters do a nice job of laying out the objectives of Police Youth Dialogues and of providing practical advice for how to facilitate such encounters without falling into the "potholes" that can derail conversations or even reify negative stereotypes, further undermining trust on both sides.

Police Youth Dialogues are not "magic potions" for instantly and painlessly transforming decades or more of distrust rooted in systemic oppression. But the authors make a compelling case that

they are an important and perhaps too-easily overlooked instrument with potential to help interrupt a cycle of violent distrust. And it is surely refreshing to encounter a book that puts forward a concrete proposal that is local in scope, grounded in face-to-face encounter, and entirely actionable if not necessarily easy nor painless. I found myself thinking of the “call-ins” described by David Kennedy in his 2012 book about homicide, *Don’t Shoot*. Sometimes the encounters he recounted worked and sometimes they went badly. The skill of the facilitator and the willingness of the police chief to model humility both went a long way toward engendering trust. Not that Police Youth Dialogues are exactly the same as those efforts described in the “Boston Ceasefire” model or the “pulling levers” approach. The objective here is both more modest and more expansive than Kennedy’s approach because its sole aim is to build trust in communities that have learned to distrust each other. “Police Youth Dialogues present a tenable and effective method for engendering empathy and connection between two groups who have come into violent and fatal confrontations with each other throughout history” (p. 107). This is a book that can be fruitfully read and discussed in a variety of settings, from a college classroom to a police unit. Here’s hoping that it reaches a wide audience.