



The Effects of Toxic Stress on Youth and the Economy

A Conversation with Faye Gary
Summarized by Dionissi Aliprantis

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—Dr. Faye Gary

The Program on Economic Inclusion was created to increase the Cleveland Fed’s understanding of the obstacles to economic inclusion for communities in our District, as well as approaches to overcome those obstacles. We hold *Conversations on Economic Inclusion* for this purpose, allowing researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and community members to learn from one another about economic inclusion.

We recently had a *Conversation on Economic Inclusion* with Dr. Faye Gary, Distinguished University Professor at Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Gary is an expert on youth development; not only has she studied the issue with degrees in fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, psychiatric nursing for children and adolescents, and special education, but she also co-founded and runs a mentoring program at Case Western called The Provost Scholars Program.

We discussed with her how to provide the kinds of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments that have been shown to effectively support students dealing with toxic stress and how those situations can foster positive youth development that will lead to labor market success in adulthood. One big idea that has stuck with me from our conversation is the distinction she made between privilege and advantage. She argued that while we cannot individually change the privileges that come from circumstances of birth, we can help children navigate toxic stress and we can extend advantages to more children.

Dr. Gary’s comments have been condensed and edited for clarity.

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Privilege and advantage: We should be focused on extending educational advantages to more children

Dr. Gary described education and health care as two priorities for ensuring successful youth development. She made an important distinction between privilege and advantage. She noted that privilege is determined at birth, and so we cannot grow it or give it to everyone. But advantage is something we *can* grow and spread to more people, including those who have not traditionally had many advantages in life, especially in education or in the labor market. She described her experience gaining advantages through the education she received and the social networks she formed at educational institutions. She pointed out that we can extend education and labor market opportunities to more children.

In our society we have set up a system that I explain by two additional concepts. One is a concept of white privilege and the other is a concept of advantage.

Now, let me see if I can explain it. White privilege is something that some people have at birth. You can't take it away from them. It's something that they did not necessarily earn. They were born white just as I'm born Black. That's white privilege. Now that's a given in our society and in many other societies, fair skin is very important. But now the other concept is advantage. Now in this society, despite my darker skin, I have had some advantage.

Advantage is basically theoretical, but can also be concrete. I got advantages when I went to St. Xavier College. I got advantage when I went to San Francisco and met good friends. I got some advantage when I was at the University of Florida and met two men that I trusted explicitly, and they had white skin and they were very powerful and very knowledgeable, all Harvard and Yale. They came with the right pedigree and et cetera. All of that was impressive to me. But despite that, I would eat dinner with them at their table and they would tell me and reaffirm the advantage that I have.

I would never have the privilege, but I could have the advantage. So I think we have to make some distinction about that and think about the ways that privilege helps to beget advantage. And **that's what happened to me. It was their privilege that made advantage for me.** And if we look at that fact, perhaps we could stop talking so much just about white privilege and instead focus on the question, "**How can we take white privilege to extend advantages to other people?**" And it's **initially theoretical, but it can be concretized and it also can be operationalized to help other people.**

Excellence starts with a belief in students' ability to excel

When talking about education, Dr. Gary brought up

the policy about what is excellence on an essay, or what is excellence for a biology project? What is the policy about excellence at the school? And how is that policy manifested and who monitors that policy? Who's responsible for that policy? And what happens if a child can't read at the third grade?

I asked Dr. Gary about whether we can realistically expect excellence when confronted with the challenges of concentrated poverty. I brought up our recent *Conversation* with Richard Rothstein, the author of *The Color of Law*, and the obstacles created for schools serving a student body that is overwhelmingly poor

and often experiencing the kinds of trauma leading to toxic stress. I asked how can we support those schools and how can we support those students to reach excellence. Her response was:

Well, I think we did it in our little country school—after we built the fire in the stove to stay warm and baked our potato for lunch. Because we never strayed from the fact that we were all capable of learning how to read. And our teacher told us we were beautiful and we were bright and one day America would recognize us.

We know that poverty exists, but we know that poverty exists because of the policies that have been developed that created it.

A broader conversation about No Child Left Behind is for another discussion. But when George W. Bush was advocating for the policy, one of the things he said that resonates with me is that **Black children, and probably brown children too, suffer from the bigotry of low expectations. So I would begin with the bigotry of low expectations. I don't want anybody teaching my children who doesn't think they can excel.**

Affirming peers and teachers allowed Dr. Gary to overcome obstacles

Dr. Gary talked about growing up on a farm with a rural perspective, close to animals and the seasons. She described some of the ways her education was affected by growing up in the segregated South:

Well, I'm a graduate of Florida A&M University, which is in Tallahassee. And interestingly, **Florida A&M is about five or six blocks from Florida State University. You might know Florida State University as the Seminoles. But we were not allowed on their campus. Florida A&M University was Florida's university for its Black citizens, and that's how our administration was sometimes introduced to the general public.**

So all of my college classmates, all of the faculty, staff, et cetera, were Black. And we were not allowed to go uptown in Tallahassee in a group. We had to go two people, not more than three people. A critical mass was very threatening to the powers-that-be in Florida at that time, and perhaps to a lesser degree, or more subtle, even now.

So we managed to transverse all of that. We had a Black hospital, Florida A&M University Hospital, and all of the patients there were Black. All of the nurses were Black. We had one or two physicians who would come there to care for Black patients on a certain day. All total, there must have been five or six physicians who were associated with the hospital. Now I make that point because I graduated from nursing school, not ever having touched a white patient, never.

While in this Black bubble, Dr. Gary noted the importance of the affirmation she received in her high school and college:

At my high school, we were affirmed and our teachers would tell us that we were as good as anybody else, what was missing was our opportunity. And when I got to Florida A&M University, everybody was Black, and I met some students that I would consider to be geniuses. They were genius musicians, genius thinkers, genius scientists, genius dancers, genius everything. All of us collectively knew that at some level, this was a sham. Because genius is genius and it's distributed, I think, equally across the world. And that's what we were told, but we had no way to test it out because we were in this Black bubble.

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Reflecting on the different environment she later experienced, Dr. Gary talked about how, despite being the only Black student on campus, being welcomed by her white classmates allowed her to create genuine relationships with them. Moreover, sustaining the affirmation from her high school and college teachers and peers allowed her to overcome all of the negativity and racial hostility that she faced at every corner.

I went to Chicago and I went to a wonderful place called St. Xavier College. It's now a university. And at the time I was there it was an all-women's Irish Catholic college. I had worked at the VA in Chicago, and that's how I learned about it. But I was frightened to death – until I got there and I was welcomed. I was told that I couldn't have a roommate because I needed to study. The Dean assigned me a carrel, and she gave me my marching orders. She told me, "Here you can be as successful as anyone else. All you need to do is let us know how we can help you." And for some strange reason, I believed her.

St. Xavier University was a metamorphosis in my life in terms how I relate to people, the extent to which I could trust and care for people, which had never been an experience that I'd had with white people, regardless of whom they were. I also learned that my thinking and my potential were as good as anybody else's. I had never gotten that affirmation. We were always told that we were second class and we could never do, we could never be, et cetera, et cetera.

We read about it. The kinds of snares that came at us. You have to remember that in Ocala we could not go to the library. I drank "colored" water. We could not go to the toilet, so we always had a little pot in the car. That was the kind of experience that I had. So to be in a place where you were reaffirmed, despite the color of your skin and your historical perspective, was very, very reaffirming to me.

Now I was able to make those connections without any fear or any hesitation because of my experience at St. Xavier, where I had learned to trust other perspectives and other life perspectives, and because of the genius that I had been exposed to at Florida A&M University and the way we reinforced each other and told each other "Girl, are you smart!" or "You've got it going on," or whatever.

Creating places where kids are safe: Schools as community centers

Dr. Gary thinks that we should leverage schools to provide more supports for students, especially support in the form of a safe place for students who might otherwise be exposed to violence and trauma. She sees benefits from schools being both the center of community life and the basis for community:

I do not subscribe to the notion that poverty in and of itself prevents a child from learning. I think we need to have a system that recognizes what a child needs and then provides it, and that's a safe place. I think going to school from 8:30 to 3:00 o'clock and then going home to a system that does not continue to support the child is not helpful. If I had my magic wand I would have children in school from about 7:00 in the morning to about 8:00 or 9:00 at night.

I would also involve parents. Parents need to be educated. Parents need to have their GEDs. There's some initiative now to get that. Some parents feel that, when you talk about education, they don't know a thing, so they shut down. They don't want to expose their lack of knowledge. They don't come to the school because it feels like a foreign place.

School has to become a part of the community. Now, when I was growing up everything happened at the school. That was the only place we could go. Since we were Black children, we couldn't go to the library or to restaurants. So everything happened at the school, everything. And the teachers and the principals, they lived next door to the students, so we were one collective community.

That's not the case anymore. What I learned is that now the teachers live one place and they come to work at a school and they go back. And that's especially true in high-poverty areas. Teachers don't live in the poverty. They come to it, they teach the students, and then they go back. That works okay for some and not so well for others. But I think that *The Color of Law* has been disadvantageous and has presented policies that create and maintain poverty. And the current policy response does not come with a sufficient armamentarium of resources to correct the policies that have been in place over time.

Mentoring and social networks

There is ample research in economics showing that job referral networks are an important part of the labor market. Dr. Gary described examples of this phenomenon, arguing that access to social networks is critical for economic opportunity; giving students advantages. She described the ways that mentoring can provide access to social networks and how this can affirm students and encourage their development.

One of the things that is missing in under-resourced communities is networks to important people and important organizations, just networks, having relationships with people who can make a difference, or who can provide the advantage if you will. So once our children get into the program [The Provost Scholars], they have an armamentarium of a network that they never even knew existed. Through their mentors they get to go to this dean, that program, the admissions office, et cetera. They can go to the Think Box or have a conversation with the career center. They have access to a variety of resources that exist at Case, like the resources that exist on many other college campuses.

But they also have access to human and material resources, human resources, because their mentor can say, well, I'll call Bob or I'll call John and we'll make an appointment for him to tell you about the HoloLens. That's what happens. That's so powerful for these children. So they become empowered and the sense of helplessness, hopelessness wanes, and their dreams get fertilized, if you will. And then they can make plans for themselves because they know that they have a safety net, they can call a mentor to say whatever. They could tell Ms. Kate that they need some help with biochemistry or whatever. And we try and provide that. They don't have anybody in their neighborhood to tutor them in biochemistry, let's just be honest about it. Nor is there anybody in their church who can help them, but there's somebody here who can. That's networking.

To say that what I have, I will also share with you, is the advantage that comes with sharing resources and opportunities that they would not otherwise have. That's so reaffirming, it provides consensual validation that I can do this. And the mentor tells them every time, you can do this, I will help you do this. Get your grades good and you can come to Case and you can get a scholarship, et cetera. If you don't come to Case, we'll help you go wherever else you wish to go.

Relationships can break down racial divisions

Much like Dr. Gary's experience with welcoming classmates at St. Xavier, a relationship with a caring mentor can break down racial divisions.

We transcend all of this American dilemma of race. Many of our mentors are Caucasian. I want people who are experts in whatever they say they're experts in because our children deserve the best. And I want them to care enough to know enough to do something. That's all, and to be consistent and persistent. And our children say to us that having a relationship with their mentor is the first meaningful relationship they've ever had with a white person. It reminds me of what I said about St. Xavier University and about Gertrude Hess, who came to stay with me. There are some human connections that are beyond race and skin color. That has been a most difficult lesson for Americans to understand, whether Black or white. And at times when I encounter a situation which I think is so unnecessary, I have to tell myself that I can get beyond this and I can go on. But it's because of the previous experiences I've had with good, decent people who come from all parts of this world that we can go on. That's the critical mass.

The Provost Scholars mentoring program

I asked Dr. Gary to describe The Provost Scholars mentoring program and what is the basis of its success. Her description was as follows:

Well, the program has two basic umbrellas, and that is academic excellence and social emotional learning. And just about everything we do falls under one or both of those umbrellas.

Most of the mentors, who are excellent in whatever they do, are professors at the university. So they're excellent in their fields, in music and dance and biology and biochemistry and medicine, et cetera. We want the children to see others who have excelled. And we want them to develop a relationship with other people who have excelled and who have done well.

And that relationship gets developed over a period of time. It gets developed through the mentoring. They could go to their mentors' offices. They go to the student center where they talk. They go to a basketball game together with special permission. They go play catch football together. They go to a lecture with their mentor. They go to a lecture that their mentor is giving. They meet their deans, et cetera. So you expose them to a bold new world with a person who cares for them.

And we have mentors who've worked with students for four and five years. Dr. Lee Thompson, for an example, her mentee right now is our student assistant. She's been working with Dr. Thompson since she was in eighth grade, and now she's a junior at Case Western Reserve University. My mentee is now at Ohio State in graduate school, another mentee is getting ready to go to law school, and on and on.

Through the mentees' experiences, the mysticism about skin color is removed and they see a human being. They see a human being who cares for them. They see a human being who shows up every Tuesday. They go to the museum together. They go to the library. They work on essays. But it's the relationship with no strings attached. I'm here because I care about you.

We approach the social emotional learning in many different ways. One of the basic ways is that we have a code of ethics that everybody has to follow, including me, Miss Kate, Dr. Thompson, the provost, everybody. Everybody. These are the rules of the game because we love and respect everybody. This is how we act. This is how we behave at all times. Okay? Everybody knows that, including the parents and teachers.

Our code of ethics represents our standards of behavior, which are the same for everyone. We discuss it with the parents. The teachers have it. The mentors have it. The tutors have it, et cetera. The trick is to be consistent and to try to have our guidelines, to the extent that we can, consistent with the schools'. Now there's a difference because we have 30-something children. We can reinforce our standards quicker than the schools can. We can be more resolute about our standards than the schools can. And it's very important to us because we know that we have that ability. I was talking with the principal yesterday and I told him that an old man who probably finished fourth grade would say to me, he used to call all of the girls "daughter" and the boys "son". He would say, "Daughter, good manners will get you where a dollar never will." And he was right.