

Promoting Health through Collaborative Engagement with Youth: Overcoming, Resisting and Preventing Structural Violence

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Summary

Social inclusion, as it is enacted within everyday life, is shaped by societal, structural, and relational processes, and is a key factor affecting the health and well-being of youth. While structural forms of violence arise from macro-level factors and are largely invisible, they profoundly impact individual behaviours, including interpersonal violence. In this presentation, we draw on work conducted under a national, five-year CIHR-supported formally titled: *Promoting Health through Collaborative Engagement with Youth: Overcoming, Resisting, and Preventing Structural Violence*. This project is an investigation of structural violence as it impacts the everyday lives of youth.

Introduction

Structural violence (SV) has been described as the inequitable distribution of power and life opportunities that is built into the structure of society, functioning at the macro level to shape individual behaviours (Galtung, 1969, 1990). Others have posited the nature and impact of structural violence as “systems of oppression” (Collins, 2002; McCall, 2005) and, more recently, as an issue of human rights (Ho 2008). The embedded and often invisible nature of structural violence requires a process of examination that supports individuals in connecting policies and institutions to personal and even embodied impacts. This Youth-Centred Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) project reflects in its processes a commitment to youth as experts in their own experiences (Cahill, 2007; Berman and Jiwani, 2014), giving them equitable access to conversations about the systems that impact their health. In keeping with this value orientation, youth played key roles as co-researchers and advisors in the process from early on. Among their initial activities shaping the direction of the research, they renamed the project as *Voices against Violence: Youth Stories Create Change*.

The Project

The *Voices against Violence* project consists of a large, multidisciplinary team was assembled across Canada, including 14 academics, 15 community-based knowledge users, and 10 community partners. This adult researcher team was complemented with a National Youth Advisory Board which engaged 12 youth from across the Canada in phone-conference and face-to-face meetings throughout the grant’s five years, in order to help shape the direction of the research and its knowledge translation activities. Among the groups conducted, specific populations of youth included racialized and Aboriginal youth, those who identified as GLBTT, youth with

previous involvement with homelessness and/or the justice system, and youth who identified as newcomers to Canada. All youth involved with this project received financial compensation for their participation in the research, and had further opportunities to engage with the project's knowledge translation and exchange strategies. In their roles as co-researchers in the 25 research groups conducted across Canada, approximately 200 youth ages 16 to 24 have generated knowledge to inform the development of programs and policies based on an understanding of their needs and realities.

Our second speaker focuses on a pragmatic description of how these research groups were conducted, and references findings from three research groups as well as NYAB activities through the course of her five-year role as coordinator of the NYAB and research facilitator. Facilitation in the research groups prioritized the creation of a safe, judgement-free space where youth could feel comfortable enough to discuss topics not generally available in their every day lives. Art-making served as a transitional object upon which youth could express and explore their emerging ideas relating their life experiences and structural violence. A premise of this type of art-based, emancipatory research is that insights emerge in the moment of creation and discussion with the research group, and thus data and its analysis occur collectively and iteratively through the research process. In speaking with youth about their current life pressures, much of the insights from the three groups mentioned included distinct characterizations of mental health and illness as influenced by social determinants such as employment, socio-economic status, and inclusion. Youth in these groups attributed anxiety and lack of hope to ongoing uncertainty about their financial and job prospects, and the pressure to achieve the manner of success that is depicted by the media, one largely predicated on consumerism. To address mental health and pre-empt mental illness, some youth contended, our society needs to address the lack of opportunities available to youth in today's economic landscape, including policies and structures that perpetuate student debt and decreased career options. They also shared a clear, felt sense that media pressures upon their identities — including highly sexualized images of young girls, or the image of irreparable failures attributed First Nations/Aboriginal and racialized youth — significantly affects their levels of anxiety and their potential use of ill-coping techniques such as drinking and drugs. Youth called for policies that regulate media's depiction of youth, as well as for programs that increase youths' media literacy and ability to challenge deficit-based portrayals of youth identities.

Our third speaker undertakes an upstream approach to connect youths' experiences with current policies operating upon their lives. In speaking with youth about their experiences of structural violence, we sought to explore the policy landscape that either assists or hinders youth from achieving their long-term goals for stability. What we heard were frustrations with the justice system, child welfare system, education system, and housing/homelessness systems. In particular, although at times youth identified policies they found problematic within specific systems, it was often the overlapping effects of policies across systems that proved challenging. Although these systems are primarily within provincial jurisdiction, we note that nearly identical challenges were

faced by youth in all provinces within our project. Therefore, we see significant opportunity for change both within provinces and territories themselves, but also with national oversight. Ultimately, we recommend that provincial reviews be conducted to seek policy reform to support homeless youth across systems, but that this be conducted within a national collaboration so that practices and knowledge can be shared across provinces and territories. In this process, it will be essential that the voices of youth with lived experiences of homelessness continue to be central to decision making.

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About the Authors

Helene Berman, PhD, is Professor, Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, and Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Western University. Dr. Berman's program of research, funded by grants from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and Status of Women Canada, has focused on the subtle and explicit forms of violence in the lives of girls and young women. In recent years, she has extended that work to include boys and young men and currently leads a CIHR Team Grant, Promoting Health through Collaborative Engagement with Youth: Overcoming, Resisting and Preventing Structural Violence (www.voicesagainstviolence.ca). She presents her work nationally and internationally, publishes widely, and is Past President of the Nursing Network on Violence against Women International. With a lengthy history of community-based research, Dr. Berman has played a lead role in the establishment of the Centre for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion and currently serves as the Centre's first Academic Director, alongside the Centre's Community Director, Steve Goodine (Board, London InterCommunity Health Centre). She is lead editor of the anthology, *Faces of Violence in the Lives of Girls* (Althouse Press, 2014), the recipient of the Nursing Network on Violence against Women International 2015 Excellence in Research Award, and a Fellow in the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

Eugenia Canas, is a **PhD Candidate in the** Health Information Science program at Western University. Her research involves critical, participatory and art-based research approaches to understand the impact of youth stakeholder input on the design and delivery of mental health services. She has been coordinator of the National Youth Advisory Board of the Voices against Violence project since 2012, and a CIHR Trainee of the project since 2013. Ms Canas also co-coordinates the Centre for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion (CRHESI), which is dedicated to knowledge generation and translation through collaborative partnerships between academia and community organizations in London, Ontario. Eugenia has clinical experience as an art therapist in child/adolescent oncology, working in hospital and community settings.

Abe Oudshoorn, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing. Dr. Oudshoorn's research, supported in part by SSHRC and CIHR, focuses on the intersection of poverty and health, with particular focus on issues of housing, homelessness, gender, mental health, addictions, and primary care. In recognition of his contributions, he received the 2016 Western Humanitarian Award. Dr. Oudshoorn has been a member of the Centre for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion (CRHESI) Steering Committee since prior to its inception. Dr. Oudshoorn has administrative experience as the Year 3/4 undergraduate program lead over the last 7 years in the School of Nursing.