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Uncovering the Public/Private Dilemma for Rural Youth Using Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

While the rural youth identity is an intersectional experience that creates a heterogeneous group of young people, a close exploration of a specific rural location can illuminate an experience that is both unique and shared. In this participatory action research study, a group of youth participated in one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions to describe their experience of their rural location. Reports, statistics, and youth counsellors also provided information about the local youth experience. What emerged was a consideration of the unique divide between public and private social realms that can create a dilemma for youth who are simultaneously encouraged to succeed in public life while provided with limited access to opportunities in that public life. The research project culminated in a sculpture created by a team of youth artists that incorporated the final analysis about the public/private divide. The sculpture is now a permanent display in the region.

Keywords: Rural youth, public/private, arts-based knowledge mobilization, participatory action, neo-liberalism

Where we live, and where we come from informs much of our identity. Godlewska (2013) has suggested that it is not that we cannot exist without place, but that place cannot exist without us. For youth, the places they live and their sense of belonging in those places plays an important role in their development. Furthermore, their perceived connection to their community is related to their connection to their futures (Chipuer, Bramston, & Pretty, 2003; Petrin, Farmer, Meece, & Byun, 2011). Living in a rural area provides a unique set of experiences that define the youth experience apart from youth in an urban setting (Dunkley, 2004; Leyshon, 2011; Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013; Yarwood, 2015). Rurality must be understood as more (and less) than a tangible physical space or environment. The rural context also comprises the mental spaces or 'symbolic landscapes' that condition everyday thought and action (Crang, 1998).

The purpose of this grounded theory research project was to use an arts-based, participatory action approach in order to explore the experience of youth living in a rural region in Southwestern Ontario. The experience of youth is an important undertaking as a consideration of a particular population who are becoming aware of the ways in which they are disenfranchised and poorly equipped to enter into their futures with a sense of success. When special attention is given to rurality, we are able to consider the impact of place on the youth experience. Additionally, we support an intersectional analytic exploration, where various diversities create a heterogeneous group of youth who bring subjective experiences to their rurality.

Background

Youth

Youth, according to Giroux (2008, 2012), are the new underclass, which is described as being an adjunct class that is cut off from political and economic societal existence, a "rootless mass divorced from the means of production – definable only in terms of social inefficiency, and hence not strictly a class..." (Welshman, 2006, p. xii). The underclass, under neoliberal ideology, are discourses to be personally and culturally accountable for the difficulties rendered by their systemic cut off from economic and political activities (Tyler, 2013; Welshman, 2006). As an expendable and disposable part of the social system, and through repeated exclusions, the underclass experience a series of dashed expectations (Welshman, 2006). Exclusions include obstacles to opportunities that can increase skills and knowledge, which in turn, creates further difficulties in finding employment (Devicienti & Poggi, 2011; Schweiger, 2014; Veenstra, 2007). With a specific consideration of excluded youth, the longer it takes youth to gain a footing in the labour market, the longer-lasting is the impact, potentially stretching well into adulthood (Furlong, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting, & Wes, 2003). The consequent hopelessness, discourses as a psycho-cultural short falling rather than a systemic injustice, is constructed to be an anti-work lifestyle, justifying rebuke and punitive responses (Tyler, 2013).

In his specific consideration of youth as an underclass, Giroux (2012) described neo-liberal processes that are waging what he called three forms of war against youth: soft, hard, and surveillance war (as cited in Pollard, 2014, p. 181). Soft war refers to a process of commodification. Social media and technology that excludes parents and adult supervisors is used to convince youth that they are only valuable as consumers. Frost and Hoggett (2008)

elaborated on the commodification process with their description of the ways in which youth are structurally oppressed by individualization and a staunch consumerism where unique identity becomes available only through unremitting market engagement. Dunkley (2004) described how an exclusive youth market becomes an entrapment for youth because it is completely severed from markets and caring involvements in children's and adults' lives.

Hard war refers to the criminalization of youth, where youth are deprived of educational and social support systems in order to fortify a corrections system whereby incarceration rather than education is used as a first and most effective response (Giroux, 2012). The more marginalized the youth, the more aggressive the hard war tactics. Wacquant (2009) has described the ways in which impoverished people are punished for their circumstances, thus criminalizing the effects of poverty on personal lives. Marginalized youth can easily become entrapped in a lifelong path where there is no structural accountability. The trajectory that links involvement in the child protection system, the mental health system, and the corrections system is well-documented (Burge, 2007; Jonson-Reid, 2002; Ka Ni Kanichichk Inc., 2015; Ungar, 2005). This trajectory can begin at an early age and can be difficult to interrupt. Race and class are determining features of this trajectory, as exemplified by the over-representation of Aboriginal, racialized, and/or poor children who are brought into the child welfare system (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2009; Laverigne, Dufour, Trocmé, & Larrivée, 2008; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004).

The surveillance war describes the multiple sites of surveillance of youth, with cameras, watchful adults, and bureaucratic record keeping for ever-increasing amounts of daily activities (Giroux, 2013). Surveillance is activated by individualized accounts of youth as risky and problematic (Aranda, Zeeman, Scholes, & Morales, 2012). Scott and Hogg (2015) refer to the effects of surveillance on youth. Persistent adult supervision is the outcome of a social construction of youth as troublemakers, and leave youth without a sense of belonging in their communities (Scott & Hogg, 2015).

Neo-liberal ideology promotes individualized accounts of youth experience. Poverty, difficulties within the educational system, extended underemployment or unemployment, food insecurity, and/or hefty debt loads become experiences where youth are held utterly and personally responsible. The educational, social, health, and financial structures that have built the inequities and dilemmas that face youth are removed from a narrative that instead places blame fully on youth who face obstacles to opportunities that might provide security, self-efficacy, and sustenance (Thomson, Flynn, Roche, & Tucker, 2004). Media representations support an individualized account of youth difficulties, and promote a social construction of youth not as the potential of the future, but as the problems of the present (Tyler, 2013). Youth are often understood in media, policy, health services, and program development as being individuals who are in a life stage marked by risk and adversity (Chisholme, Kovacheva, & Marico, 2011), relative to adulthood in such a pivotal way as to portray only the transition stage into adulthood. Such a transitional conceptualization centers the adult experience, making peripheral the challenges and accomplishments of youth (Chisholme et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2004; Wyn & White, 1997).

The youth experience is by no means generalized and shared. With an intersectional lens, it becomes possible to appreciate the diverse levels of marginalization, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression that occur within the underclass of youth. Class, race, language, sexuality, and gender are among many of the personal and social intersecting attributes that differentially affect the experience of youth.

The intersectionality lens can enhance a consideration of the experience of youth. As an age group and a life stage, the experience of youth is marked by oppression, as an incomplete person (Pugh, 2014; Wyn & White, 1997), on the cusp of entrance into a competitive marketplace (Giroux 2012), and exploitable due to shifting levels of dependence on the family system over to the market system (Bottrell, 2009; Giroux, 2012). With an intersectional lens, we are mindful of the complexity of oppression. Being a youth is one oppression that can intersect with a number of other oppressions. Societal systems of hierarchy and inequity are operationalized through the ways that social identities interact in the everyday experiences of an individual's life. Intersectionality conceptualizes the ways in which oppressions are multiple, interdependent, and build upon one another (Dagkas, 2016). As Collins states, "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2015, p. 2). Another intersection to consider is the place where youth live: the rurality or urbanicity of the youth experience.

Rurality

For many scholars, geography is a consideration of place that includes the impact of history, relationships, landscape, environmental characteristics, and culture. Aranda et al. (2012), for example, described reality as a social practice where an individual's well-being is the outcome of the many interactions and negotiations that occur between that person and the surrounding community and environment. Similarly, Johnson (2012) described identity and experience as the embodiment of the political, economic, and cultural aspects of a person's place/geography. Godlewska (2013) referred to the deep link between person and place by describing place as:

"Highly integrative: it integrates the social and nonsocial environment but nevertheless has a coherence and structure thanks to the intimate and public narratives that structure our being, our narratives. Through our narratives, place is radically creative, and through our bodies it is haptic." (p. 385).

Urban experience has dominated and centered many of our health and social studies, due to the development of strong, multicultural, economic urban centers in the last few decades (Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013; Williams & Kullig, 2011; Wooff, 2015). Recently, specific considerations of the rural community have explored the unique impact of the politics, economy, and culture of rural towns. While there has been a thorough consideration of the effect of rural living on social isolation, employment, food insecurity, and precarious housing in poverty studies (e.g., Donnermeyer, 2015; Veenstra, 2007; Williams & Kullig, 2011), urbanism has, until recently, been centered by exploring the rural experience only in comparison to urban experience. In health studies, some are now insisting that rurality be considered a

unique and impactful enough experience so as to constitute it being a social determinant of health because rural living effects access, opportunities, and health services (Williams & Kullig, 2011). Health outcomes and life expectancy are negatively impacted by rural residency (Williams & Kullig, 2011; Smokowski et al., 2013). Additionally, rurality is being considered for the economic challenges that are created by the rapid global change that is altering the traditional industries of rural communities (Donnermeyer, 2015). The conservative foundations of many rural communities guide definitions of and responses to crime (Driscoll, 2014; Jiao, 1998; Scott & Hogg, 2015), demonstrating how the history of settler invasion and agriculture impacts a relationship to land and a conceptualization of difference out of which mechanisms of social control are developed (Donnermeyer, 2015; Scott & Hogg, 2015). The development of a unique understanding of rural experience will contribute greatly to many different areas of study, including youth studies.

Rural Youth

An exploration of the experience of youth in rural geographies brings together a consideration of place and a consideration of the ways that youth are socially constructed. Critical geography studies look closely at the ways in which places are structured according to their relevant power relations. Rural regions, while each unique in specific ways, also share characteristics. The powerful voices in rural areas often reflect the history of those areas (Scott & Hogg, 2015). The marginalized voices are those that are regarded to be a threat to the more powerful voices. Rural communities will be organized in response to their histories and their threats. For example, crimes committed by marginalized individuals can evoke more corrective action than crimes committed by individuals representative of the power in the community (Yarwood, 2007). By-laws, policies, services, school, police, and businesses are a few of the systems that work together to create a particular order that defines normative ways of community conduct and non-normative, discouraged ways of conduct (Aranda et al., 2012).

Youth are one of the community groups that are constructed in such a way as to constitute real threat to the organizational structures of the community. Much research about rural youth can sanction problem-focused constructions of youth by emphasizing, without structural considerations, concerns such as excessive drinking, drug use, and violence. Youth, thereby, are conceptualized as individuals who pose a considerable threat to the community and are thus in need of control (Dunkley, 2004; Sotuki & Duku, 2012). A number of scholars have identified the ways in which rural communities are organized along power relations that marginalize youth identity, resulting in a silencing of youth to the extent that youth are unable to articulate their unique identities, experiences, and capacities (Scott & Hogg, 2015; Sotuki & Duku, 2012; Yarwood, 2007). There are scholars, such as Dunkley (2004) and O'Toole, Dennis, Kirkpatrick, and Farmer (2010), who assert an alternative conceptualization of rural youth. They emphasize the ways that rural youth resist the impact of a rural, conservative environment that regulates individuals who may bring change. Such resistance can alter current negotiations, exchanges, and power mechanisms in their rural communities.

Another feature that many rural communities share is a physical natural setting that has not been overtaken by the residential and commercial build-up designed to accommodate large concentrated populations in urban settings. Small, spread-out populations and direct access to

natural features, such as meadows, fields, rivers, creeks, trees, wildlife, and livestock characterize rural communities. This can support a significant connection to land and place, offers an idyllic setting, and contributes to a sense of community that is fostered by networks, shared histories, and a rich exchange of social capital. At the same time, rural life can contribute to a sense of isolation, with limited opportunities, lack of mobility, constrained autonomy, and lack of privacy. A number of studies with youth living in rural areas have observed this dichotomous description provided by youth about their communities: the identity that is formed through place is one with a strong connection to peaceful and healthy environments, a fear about outside forces threatening the beauty of the rural place, and a discontent with the dearth of accessible resources and activities (e.g., see Driscoll, 2014; Leyshon, 2011).

Research Design

Intersectionality is a field of study, as well as an analysis, and a critical praxis (Collins, 2015). In other words, we can enhance an understanding of a wide range of human experiences through the lens of intersectionality as a contemporary field of study. Additionally, by considering the complex and multi-layered impact of oppression and social experience, we can envision meaningful action for positive social change through the inevitable consideration of social structures. The action itself is also understood through the intersectional frame as having an impact on both individual and structural phenomenon, due to the analytic awareness of the integral immersion of the individual and the structure. The intersectional analytical framework can also guide research. For this study, qualitative methodologies featured the subjective, meaning-making aspect of experience, utilizing participatory and arts-based methods to access alternative ways of knowing and to incorporate action into the research work, across sectors in order to create space for structural considerations.

This research project received REB approval. This study was guided by an exploratory research question: What is the experience of youth aged 16-26 years living in the rural geography under investigation? In considering a definition of youth for this project, we chose to consider life stage. We focused on a decade that is characterized by transition into higher levels of independence. In Canada, the age of 16 is significant due to increasing levels of independence. For example, at the age of 16, the relationship between youth and the job market changes as the employer is no longer legal obligated to accommodate school operating hours (Policy Horizons Canada, 2017). By 26 years of age, most youth are no longer in high school and are moving into the next stage of their lives. Goals now mark a life stage of even greater independence and post-secondary experience, which may or may not have included further education. This life stage definition is characterized by social and political factors, and, thus, is limited by cultural and historical parameters.

The rural community that the participant youth live in is a township made up of 16 communities. All of these communities are rural. The township has a population of approximately 27,000, with a density rate of 65.5 persons per square kilometer (Canada Census, 2011). By comparison, it is located almost 100 kilometers from a metropolis whose density rate is 4,149.5 persons per square kilometer, as well as being located approximately 30 kilometers each from 3 mid-sized cities whose density rates are an average of 1,482 per square kilometer (Canada Census, 2011). The average household income for the township is slightly above the

national average (Canada Census, 2011). The elected federal representation for the township has been the Conservative party since 2004 (Elections Canada).

The exploration focused on one rural geographic region, with the hopes of contributing to a theory that may be enlightening for this particular region. However, rural youth in general share experiences because of the commonalities that exist across rural experiences. A grounded theory approach to research allows for an investigation that incorporates theoretical development as an integral aspect of the research project (Charmaz, 2006; Redman-McLaren & Mills, 2015). By accessing multiple sources of data, and scaffolding the data sites so that layering and ongoing re-assessment can occur, the research study became a deep inquiry that can lead to the development of a theory about the experience that is being explored (Charmaz, 2006).

The project also used a participatory action research approach (PAR). Two local youth collaborated as researchers in the one-on-one youth interview guide development. They also conducted all of the in-person interviews. Additionally, the participants of the two focus groups became fellow researchers, collaboratively analyzing the data. While the analysis used grounded theory methods, the participation of research subjects in the data analysis constitutes both a transformational grounded theory approach (Redman-McLaren & Mills, 2015) and a PAR approach (MacDonald, 2012).

Finally, six local youth artists participated in a knowledge mobilization activity that was a direct response to the findings that emerged from the project. The youth artist team created a bench sculpture that was donated to the community as a permanent display. PAR is a critical approach to research that interrogates the inequity that can exist in research relations (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008; MacDonald, 2012). By inviting research participants to take on active roles in the research as research collaborators, the inequity between researcher and researched is shifted to create the potential for more mutual engagement. PAR is also a critical resistance to the disempowering impact research can have on a community where there are no direct changes or positive impacts felt within the community because of the research (Borg, Karlsson, Kim, & McCormack, 2012; Fals Borda, 2001). PAR incorporates impact and change as part of the research process, and communities being researched can benefit directly from their involvement in the research project. In the case of this study, a group of artists developed specific and new artistic skills. Additionally, they created a permanent account of their rural youth experience for the larger community to engage with in a public setting.

Data Collection

There were multiple sites of data chosen for this project, with an emphasis on the voice of youth. Research participants were recruited using purposive sampling methods, a particularly effective method for recruiting research participants who share important traits that are specific to the focus of the investigation (Palys, 2008). The study began with a review of six current documents and statistical reports relevant to youth in the local region. The findings of this document review supplemented the next stage of data collection, one-on-one interviews that were conducted with four practitioners who work primarily with youth. With the findings from these interviews, a one-on-one youth interview guide was developed with questions about elements of rural living, community strengths and flaws, spare time, support networks, and

possibilities for change. 64 youth responded, either in person (n=8), in writing (n=49), or on-line (n=7). The findings from these one-on-one interviews with youth were presented to a focus group of 23 youth, who used the findings to develop a deeper understanding of their experience. The findings from that focus group were presented to another focus group of four youth to discuss and develop further. Throughout the data collection process, the researchers recorded their own dialogue and research journal entries as data. With each stage of data collection and analysis, the literature was reviewed further, so that the coding and literature review became reciprocal activities in order to enhance the inquiry and theory development (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

Data Analysis

The project used a multi-stage grounded theory inductive approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to data analysis. Using continuous comparative methods across the multiple sites of data collection, the first stage of the analysis was open coding with the data from the three sources of data: (a) existing local documents, (b) interviews with youth practitioners, and (c) one-on-one interviews with youth. The next stage of analysis was focused coding where a comparative analysis was conducted in order to articulate the similarities and differences between the open codes so that subcategories could be formed. The third stage of analysis involved bringing the focused codes to a focus group of 25 youth, who explored the codes further while the researchers recorded the discussion. The researchers also wrote research memos about the focus group discussion. The researchers used axial coding to analyze collaboratively the focus group and research memo data, where the data were reassembled in order to identify emerging theoretical possibilities (Charmaz, 2000). In the final stage of analysis, the reassembled data was presented to a second focus group, who explored the data further while the researchers recorded their discussion. Again, the researchers wrote research memos and conducted a second axial coding on their memos and the data from the final focus group. Throughout the coding work, the researchers returned to the literature to explore further the patterns and connections that were emerging in their analysis work. The beginning of a conceptual framework about the rural youth experience was developed based on the interpretations that both researchers made of the theoretical coding activities (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

The youth, the youth counsellors, and regional reports described the many ways in which access was limited for the local youth. Without public transportation, there were many restraints in terms of access to activities and opportunities. Limited opportunities for networking was a significant concern. The participants described how it is through networking that important socializing occurs, where information and advice about employment and other opportunities are exchanged, skills are taught and developed among peers, and friendships and connections can be built. There were few activities in the immediate area, and without public transportation, activities outside the community were difficult to access. Many youth described their rural experience as one of boredom due to the limited access to opportunities and activities. Interestingly, a large proportion of the youth wanted to see a bowling alley. Without access, many of the activities noted by the youth were home-based: television, Netflix, video gaming, baking, and reading. The activities that occurred outside of the home were often athletic: hiking,

jogging, or utilizing the athletic complex as a member of a sports team. Many youth also reported using drugs or alcohol in their free time. The high rate of drug use by local youth was identified as an issue of concern in one of the regional reports and by youth counsellors.

The counsellors and reports noted the limited support resources that were available for youth in the local community. They identified mental health support needs, specific to youth who were living with poverty-related challenges such as precarious housing, food insecurity, and underemployment as significant areas of concern. Without access, the counsellors and the regional reports identified the ways in which these needs could multiply and sustain one another.

The youth identified family as being their most important support. Friends were also described, but with much less frequency than family. The participant youth also cited teachers and other community members as resources in their community from whom they received support. However, family and friends were cited more frequently than teachers and other community members.

A number of dichotomies emerged in the descriptions the youth provided of their small rural community. On the one hand, the community was described as friendly and scenic, close-knit with a strong agricultural history and good basic resources. On the other hand, it was described as boring, with few community-based leisure activities. The close-knit features of rural communities also meant that there was a great deal of gossip and a perceived lack of privacy. While the lack of diversity was identified as a negative aspect of their rurality, some of the youth also described a transitioning community that was growing and changing in ways that raised fears and uncertainties. Interestingly, the rising number of outsiders moving into the community was described by the participant youth as a potential threat that could diminish the familiarity and safety of the setting.

When describing their hopes and goals for the future, what was noteworthy was the expressed desire to make a difference and to make parents/family proud. For the youth who wanted to stay in their community, the goals were to have a significant relationship, begin a family and secure stable employment. For the youth who intended to leave the community, the goals were to gain an education in order to secure stable employment. Many of the youth identified a goal of financial success, and a few of the youth described the goal of being able to help others.

During the focus groups, the participating youth further developed these findings. In the first focus group, many of the youth demonstrated an awareness of their own abilities and competence. The lack of access was described as an obstacle to their competence and potential. The obstacles were defined as impediments to the development of skills ranging from navigating public transportation to skills related to professional development and building relationships with unfamiliar people.

In the final focus group, the youth described how they had experienced success because of the resources they had accessed in their community. What emerged was an analysis of how youth are encountering the public and private aspects of social life in their rural communities. The public realm is described as the realm of participation (Rosicki, 2012). With the many

obstacles to accessing resources and opportunities, many youth were feeling absconded into the private recesses of social life and yet felt immense pressure to succeed in the public realm of social life. While the private realm was identified as an important resource and valued location for the youth, there was also distress about how the public realm was inaccessible and unwelcoming. Without access and relevant resources in the public realms of community life, many youth felt erased or felt that there was little in the realm that was relevant to their specific existence. As one participant described it, “when you look outside, you see lots of young children and parents walking around, and you see lots of adults, from the age of 25 and up, walking around. You don’t see any of us walking around, we are not there”.

The final analysis about the public/private dichotomy was introduced to a group of local youth artists. After participating in a training workshop with a professional sculptor, the group created a sculpture that incorporated their conceptual responses to the public/private dichotomy. A park bench was created and donated to the community as an interactive art piece. The bench is a double-seated cement bench with three shadowboxes embedded into the back. These boxes can be looked in from either side. On one side of each shadow box, a private, domestic scene is depicted and on the other side, a public community scene is depicted. This art/bench signifies an attempt to bridge public/private lives. As a knowledge mobilization action, it became a valued contribution by youth to their community. It became an opportunity for youth to transcend the seclusion of their private lives and to create space for themselves in the public sphere in a meaningful way. The bench serves as a youth-initiated dialogue with the community, affirming youth and their capacity to contribute to their community.

Discussion

The public/private divide has been foundational to many analyses about how marginalization and oppression occurs (Des Rosiers, 2003). The analysis is a feminist consideration of how the public realm of political action, economic productivity, and community/city planning is made exclusive. Gutierrez and Hopkins (2015) have noted the close alignment of feminist analyses and critical youth studies, with shared concerns related to inequality and power relations.

The public/private delineation emerged out of the burgeoning capitalist production of the nineteenth century, a division that fed the growth of capitalism and patriarchy (Woodward, 2015). With neoliberalism magnifying the characteristics of capitalism such as private property, individualism and unhampered accumulation, the separation between public and private is even more rigidly adhered to. The public/private divide serves as the mechanism of the neoliberal “political project of governing and persuasion intent on producing new forms of subjectivity and particular modes of conduct” (Giroux, 2008, p. 1). The private realm becomes a place of invisibility, so that the work, the violence, and the identities immersed in the private sphere are hidden from public consciousness, even as the private sphere is targeted for market economies and the sale of goods and services to consumers. The private realm, delineated rigidly from the public realm, is where the unacknowledged work and reproduction occurs to keep the market economy robust while appearing to be self-sustaining. When the work, activities, and identities of the private realm are hidden through an adherence to the public/private divide, exploitations

become possible, upon which the neoliberal need for precarious employment, unequal valuation, and accumulation is built (Giroux, 2008; Pateman, 1988; Woodward, 2015).

Alternatively, the public sphere is the space of the commons, where participation, visibility, and valued contributions occur. While access to and movement in public space is considered to be a basic tenet of human rights and freedom (Noble and Poynting, 2010), the lack of access for some social groups reveals that rights are a universal abstraction that is not, in fact, universal to lived experience. Rather, rights are enjoyed according to one's deservingness: how a society establishes who is entitled to certain rights, and who is not (Meloni, Rousseau, Ricard-Guay, & Hanley, 2017; Willen, 2012). The exclusion from the public realm is amplified further by intersections such as race, ability, class, and sexuality. When exclusion from the public realm occurs, the private realm of home and domesticity becomes a closed entrapping territory. While there are compelling analyses of how the home can become a creative site of power and capacity (i.e. hooks, 1991; Reid, 2008), the boundaries between public and private remain rigid so that autonomous and smooth passage between the two realms can be irresolvable.

The findings from this research project present a youth experience where an insurmountable public/private divide is felt to be imposed. Additionally, a contradiction creates a unique quandary for the youth. While the youth describe many barriers to active and engaged participation in the public realm of their community, they also are under significant pressure to perform well in the public realm through nimble progress in the education system, increasing skill development, relational prowess, and financial achievement. The limited access to the public realm restrict the youth to the private spheres of their lives.

Most of the youth in this study spent a large portion of their time attending school outside of the home. However, schools serve the function of institutions as described by Foucault, who theorized at length about the ways in which institutions utilize practices that reproduce a societal organization that maintains power imbalances (1977, 2013). Further exploration would consider the multiple ways in which educational institutions reproduce a public/private divide for students. While an extensive exploration of the educational institutions in this study was not conducted, the data revealed institutional practices that exerted pressure to succeed socially and academically, as well as the troubling repercussions for those who did not succeed (i.e. bullying and psychiatric treatment). There was no data about how the institution supported a smooth passage between public and private realms of existence.

In order to enjoy autonomous passage between public and private realms, youth must experience a sense of belonging in both spheres. Belonging can be described as a concept related to ownership, where ownership itself is conceptualized as a network of relationships that establish the ownership (Keenan, 2010). Limited access to public spaces is the consequence of a series of relations that interfere with free and open access, ownership, and belonging. Belonging is distributed along the lines of inequity that are orchestrated by and in allegiance to the established power relations that comprise a geography (Noble and Poynting, 2010). Leyson (2011) also considered the relationship between youth and their rural communities, and noted the lack of a sense of belonging due to the diminished sense of power that many rural youth feel.

Petrin, et al. (2011), in a study about the experience of youth in a rural setting, noted that individuals' expectations and goals needed to align with the opportunities of their environment. They found that youth did not feel an alignment between their goals and the opportunities of their communities. As a result, the youth felt disconnected from their communities and, significantly, from their futures. Leyshon (2011) studied how relations were organized in a rural community that left many of the rural youth feeling disconnected and unable to exercise power. In his study, the youth described how they felt governed by adults who were able to determine where youth belonged and, therefore, where they did not belong. Without belonging, the youth had few opportunities to gather and socialize in their communities. They felt marginalized within communities that did not accommodate spaces for them to gather. In other studies about rural youth, the public spaces that are available in community are deemed adult spaces by restrictions imposed by such indicators as signs, police, and adults (Yarwood, 2017, 2015). The messages underlying the not-belonging that rural youth experience convey public space as being unsafe for youth, and also describe public space as being at risk of disruption by youth through their inappropriate use of space according to adult standards of use (Dunkley, 2004).

Johansen and Chandler (2015) looked specifically at the mechanisms of power in rural communities, relying upon Foucault's (1980) description of power as being an exercise rather than a possession. They explored how community relationships are conducted to support particular exercises of power. In his work with rural youth and policing, Yarwood (2015) noted that those in positions of power were most likely to form strong community partnerships with police. Such partnerships often resulted in the regulatory targeting of marginalized groups such as youth.

Reflective of Giroux's concept of a surveillance war (2012), a number of explorations of youth in their rural communities have noted the use of surveillance as a regulatory mechanism. For example, Driscoll (2014) explored the surveillance that rural youth are exposed to because of living in an environment with public spaces that exclude youth. Scott and Hogg linked the high levels of surveillance that rural youth are placed under to a low level of connection to the community. In another study of rural youth, it was noted that adults used various methods of surveillance, such as watchful suspicion, police, and gossip, to regulate and code the public spaces of the community (Leyshon, 2011).

Shared public space provides opportunities to participate and connect with community. A lack of access to public spaces contributes to youth feeling overwhelmed, marginalized, and invisible (Social Planning Toronto, 2011). Surveillance does not indicate being seen, rather, it indicates being mis-seen, held at arm's length, and treated with suspicion. Surveillance is prompted by mis-recognition, a scrutiny that has little to do with an appreciation of the full identities of the youth. Surveillance is an erasure due to the authority of socially constructed identities, with the marginalizing effect of removing youth from public spaces.

What has emerged from our research project is the need to find ways for youth voices to be a stronger part of their rural community. The implications for action span the many dimensions of community life, prompted by questions, such as: How can youth become more meaningfully involved in the political lives of their communities? How can youth participate in the planning and development of their communities? How can youth presence be celebrated in

their communities? Rather than focusing solely on the changes and acts of resistance that youth can engage in and be supported with, attention must also be given to the structures that serve to exclude and silence. What political mechanisms need to be addressed? What roles can be created for youth within the infrastructure of rural communities? How can funding, subsidy, and training opportunities be created for and by youth? How can policing shift in order to contribute to a change in the trust relations between communities and local youth? Finally, how can the school accommodate public and visible youth experience, rather than colluding through mechanisms, such as homework in the expulsion of youth into the private realm of home? One example could be the development of positive, welcoming, inclusive community-based homework centres. These questions and their possible solutions require us to consider critically the policy and community development work that can address the relationship between rural youth and their communities.

For this research project, the art became a significant action, particularly so when considered from the intersectional lens. The bench was the collective development of youth artists, all of whom felt resonance with the public/private dilemma that emerged from the research findings. The sculpture, even as a concept, became a subjective expression AND a community-level response as an idea that immediately included community and interaction because it was a bench. The idea of the shadow boxes embedded into the back of the bench became a demand for the rural youth experience to be looked at more closely. The person/s sitting on the bench would need to peer into miniature scenes that are recognizable and familiar to all community members, part of their everyday experiences in this community (Figure 1 and 2). The bench itself calls to be engaged with, with two seats that serve an important function: sit, pause, rest and reflect. As an expression of the local youth experience, this becomes a powerful call to the community. The fact, we realized in hindsight, that this bench is over 800 pounds, has been placed in a central location, and is virtually impossible to relocate (Figure 3). From an intersectional perspective, we see an action that has incorporated the subjective youth experience that also serves as a direct resistance to a community with systems and resources that have been experienced as silencing and exclusionary.

Figure 1. Miniature Living Room

Figure 2. Miniature Bathroom

Figure 3. Bench Installation

Conclusion

The youth who participated in this project discussed themes of access, opportunity, and the ability to realize their potential to contribute to their communities. Through these discussions, the youth uncovered a disconnect between public and private spheres that prevents youth from being more fully engaged in their communities, their identities, and their futures (Chipuer, et al., 2003; Petrin, et al., 2011). The significant action of this PAR research was the creation of a park bench that was in direct response to the public/private disconnect that had emerged. The park bench became a community-based knowledge mobilization activity.

Participation in the public realm creates a bridge between public and private, blurring the divisions between these two social locations. When youth are able to participate in their communities, they receive a more robust and connected recognition within their communities. With meaningful participation in the public realm, belonging, connection, and the realization of

potential occurs. As Edgeworth noted in his research about rural communities, participation “disrupts an easy insider-outsider dichotomy” (2015, p. 353).

The ability to traverse both public and private realms of social life was significant for the youth who participated in our study. In their discussions about ability, knowledge, and skill, alongside issues of supports, access, and opportunity, it was demonstrated that the private realm was an important positive space for many of the participant youth. At the same time, participant youth expressed a desire for more access and opportunities in order to exercise competence and goal acquisition in the public realm. We suggest that an analysis of the public/private realms of social life is a robust way to conceptualize rural youth experiences. A deeper understanding of the interplay between these realms can guide the critical assessment of how spaces are organized for/against youth that create the marginalization that supports the classification of youth as an underclass. The public/private analysis also informs action implications that diminish the rigid boundaries that separate public from private life experience. As artist/researcher Suzanna Chan (2003) writes, “instead of merely reversing the public/private hierarchy and thus achieving another dogma, the opposition can be displaced when the interweaving of public and private is revealed, and both are marked with the other’s potential” (p. 220).

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