Uncovering the Meaning and Mattering of Youth Work in Mental Health Care Contexts Through Grounded Theory Methodology

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How do youth workers apply mental health literacies to practice with young people impacted by suicide and/or mental health concerns in various settings after completing an educational program specifically designed for youth workers?
Sensitizing Concepts

Mental Health Literacies
- **Licona & Russell, 2013** “valuing knowledges that emerge from the inside-out and the bottom-up” (p. 2)
- **Cervetti et al., 2006** Literacies are “inherently situated in personal, historical, cultural, and social contexts”

Principles of Adult Learning
- **Samaras et al., 2014** - question, take risks, share beliefs, express vulnerabilities, and accept others’ feedback and perspectives
- **Jickling, 2009** - “Experiential understandings adds flesh and life to the bones so often polished smooth and white by analytical thought”

Professional Identity Development
- **Trede et al. 2012** “All point towards the notion that professional identity is a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn and make sense of practice”
- **Rappoport et al., 1999** – “dynamic portfolio of selves”
Choosing a method/ology...

**PROCESS**
Explore social and interactional processes…

**THEORY**
Explain human behaviour as it occurs within a social context…

**PRACTICE**
Resolves practical problems encountered in the workplace…
MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

1. Youth Work & Mental Health Care
2. Epidemiology of Mental Disorders & Myths about Mental Illness
3. Understanding the Brain
4. Symptoms of Mental Disorders
5. Understanding Mental Disorders & Introduction to Intervention
6. Attachment & Mental Health
7. Suicide
8. Behaviour Disorders
9. Mood Disorders
10. Anxiety Disorders
11. Feeding & Eating Disorders
12. Schizophrenia Spectrum & Other Psychotic Disorders
Pedagogical Approaches

- draw on existing knowledges
- encourage reflection and reflexivity
- incorporate learning spaces outside the classroom
- balance depth & breadth of content
- promote knowledge AND skills
Data Collection (& Analysis!)

Group 1: 4 Grad Students
- pre/mid/post interviews
- 2 self-reflection papers

Group 2: 6 Grad Students
- pre/post interviews
- 2 self-reflection papers

Group 3: 3 U/G Students
- 6 pre/post workshop quizzes
- 3 post workshop written reflections
- artifacts & observations

Winter 2016
Winter 2017
Fall/Winter 2017
I: Ok we have to work with them, work with the parents, work with the teachers, and I feel like we’re being kind of the middle ground, we’re kind of like the link between all those people and trying to bring more positivity into the whole process, that was not really challenging but I didn’t expect that to be this kind of middleman because sometime the parent is like not working well with the teacher so we’re here and we’re kind of trying to make it work.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding the role of the youth worker</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>01-2-P.7</strong> I believe that the relationships we form with the youth are a precursor to what can occur in the future, as well as determining the extent of possible progress.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>02-2-P.7</strong> I think that as professionals, youth workers possess the skills in communication and relationship-building that are essential in working through these potential issues with other professionals. I have shifted my opinion to how youth workers can be positive additions to multidisciplinary teams, and offer a different voice and opinion on mental health treatment for youth.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>02-2-P.8</strong> The relationship between youth worker and youth can be a therapy and intervention in itself. This is something that youth workers can bring to a multidisciplinary team which I think makes them stand out, while also being a comprehensive part of a larger treatment plan. Throughout this course I have come to realize just how valuable this is, as lack of support and positive adult relationships are exactly what most of the youth we will be working with are lacking.</td>
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<th>Building relationships</th>
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<td><strong>02-2-P.8</strong> I think that one of the main reasons why youth workers are an important part of mental health services for youth is their potential to increase youth seeking and continuing to receive help for mental health concerns.</td>
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**CATEGORY: STRUGGLING TO BECOME**

**Category definition:** becoming a youth worker with integrated mental health literacies

**Subcategory: Interrogating Self**

**Definition:** Struggling with understanding mental disorders, facing personal challenges with mental health concerns in self/family/friends, increasing self-awareness.
**Subcategory: De/valuing youth work**

**Definition:** facing professional stigma and external messages

**Hartie et al., 2008** “Also, youth work, which traditionally does not provide high incomes or opportunities for career advancement, may attract and retain more women than men. These conclusions are consistent with the literature on gender differences in other professions” P.39

**Ranahan, 2013** “Professionals focused on relationally knowing the adolescent and did so amidst sometimes conflicting perspectives of other service providers. When CYC professionals thought their opinions were not heard, the relationship with the adolescent became a place to return to for the CYC professional, to know and understand the youth more, and provided clarity for the professional on their role” P.11

**Ranhan & Thomas, 2016** “Knowledge of mental health resources within a community and an individual’s capacity to access these resources is dependent on interactions and relationships with service providers and the meanings people ascribe to the process of accessing mental health care.” (p. 69)

“While these expressions delineated boundaries between the work done by YWs and that done by professionals in the "medical model," these boundaries were not experienced as antagonistic or in tension with one another. Rather, they merely demarcated a difference whereby the strengths of one profession differed from the strengths of the other.” (p. 73).

“Such interpretation reinforced a hierarchy between the two professions whereby an implicit assertion was made that professionals in the medical model hold the ability (professional capital) to confer respect upon, and value and legitimize YWs.” (p. 74).

“YWs have a responsibility to clearly articulate their role, articulate the nature and purpose of their therapeutic activities, and hold fluency in other professions’ languages with which they interface” (Ranah and Thomas, 2008) p.75

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<tr>
<th>01</th>
<th>2P.9</th>
<th>“I consider this to be an asset for my future as a youth worker because it will allow me to not only expand the type of clientele I can work with, but will also permit me to help a bigger population”</th>
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<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>2P.10</td>
<td>“I think it is sometimes difficult to be in a field that is less socially valued than others (like psychology, for example), but I think that we can express ourselves and share our perspectives to help shift other professionals’ understanding of what we can do”</td>
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De/Valuing Youth Work

Managing Confusing Role
- experiencing uncertainty – role boundaries
- difficulty articulating contributions

Adopting Misfit Stance
- marginalizing the profession
- questioning value

Valuing Contributions
- feeling confident
- distinguishing contributions

Battling/Building Seat at Table
- fighting for recognition
- recognizing limits
- collaborating
I just float around in different classrooms talking to the kids or so I'm very uncertain about my role. [Participant 03]

It was challenging to talk about these things with my colleagues as well... they also had a different education and so I say 'I don't feel that this is the right way to go about it,' but I couldn't explain why. [Participant 06]

...and just the staff just wasn't taking it seriously. They were like, “Oh he's just like, you know, upset and whatever.” And I'm like, “No.” But like he's telling me he wants to stab himself with the Epi-pen. Like what do I do with that? [Participant 05]

I did like individual, like some counselling, but whenever it got to the point of okay now we're getting into something really serious I would always take the child or the youth to the guidance counselor. [Participant 06]
The negative view society takes of mental health issues is reflected in the status of people who work with people with mental health issues….When I used to tell people what my job was, some would just look at me incredulously and say, ‘Why do you work with these types of people?’ [Participant 03]

I think the greatest challenge we will face is being recognized as professionals, with proper tools and training. One of my fears as a youth worker is that I will be pushed to the sidelines by the other more recognized professionals. [Participant 08]
I felt that we were kind of the one being rejected. The one who were the one left apart because people think we're useless, but it's actually, we're the opposite because we are actually the hub. [Participant 04]

We as youth workers are in a sense ‘service brokers’ for youth, in that we can offer resources, which may be outside our own role. We can help bridge positive connections with the services youth may access, and use our position to facilitate conversations with the youth’s family members and support systems. In this way, we can see our role as just one part of a large system, and this makes it much less overwhelming to take on. [Participant 11]

... feel a lot more confident and put myself on those teams. Cause we would have in our schools, we would have, oh yeah, the social worker and the guidance counselor would talk to each other a lot and the psychologist would talk to them. And like there was like a team of like professionals, quote unquote, right? Now I can put myself on there and actually... I know what my role is. [Participant 06]
I think that as professionals, youth workers possess the skills in communication and relationship-building that are essential in working through these potential issues with other professionals. I have shifted my opinion to how youth workers can be positive additions to multidisciplinary teams, and offer a different voice and opinion on mental health treatment for youth. [Participant 02]

I have a professional opinion about what's happening with this child and I can be part of the solution rather than just kinda being on the outside and doing my own thing by itself. [Participant 06]

This leads me to another learning; young people are more likely to ask for help regarding their mental health if it's from someone they have a relationship with. That being said, it's incredibly important for me as a future youth worker, to be vigilant about this. I hope to convey warmth and compassion in my interactions with them at all times, so that they feel safe to open up to me. [Participant 13]

I believe anyone can play a part in helping to alleviate the suffering of a young person impacted by mental health, but it is especially a job for those who have a strong connection with this person. [Participant 08]
I feel that having such intimate encounter [with] mental illness gave me a relational and family-centered perception, which would be difficult to acquire through my academic formation. Although my anxiety and depressive symptoms have created challenges along my lifespan… It was much more difficult to transform my coping strategies later on in life, as I had already formed habits. However, I also learned that it is never too late to seek help.

Engaging in learning activities... He explained that because individuals with [mental health problems] often have concomitant impairments in executive functioning, they experience more difficulty in planning and staying motivated, which explains why they were more likely to participate if he was there to facilitate the process. Another thing that I learnt was the fact that depression can be portrayed in a variety of ways. Most people may associate depression with lethargy and sleeping all day. Depression is not always expressed through sadness that may seem obvious to others.
### Professional Identity
- *Becoming and Being* part of the youth work community unfolds in the context of interprofessional relations.
- Valuations of youth work may reproduce professional hierarchies.
- Articulating role, responsibilities and contributions are integral to developing professional identity.

### Mental Health Education
- Content knowledge is insufficient on its own, yet content may provide disciplinary fluency.
- Personal knowledge is a starting point for literacy enhancement.
- Skills in system navigation, interprofessional collaboration, and exploration of issues of power and marginalization are required.
Conclusion

Future Directions…

- Further refinement of mental health literacy curriculum and pedagogical approaches
- Reaching ‘seasoned’ youth workers already engaged in practice
- Inquiry into the intersection between youth/families mental health literacies, and youth workers – the ‘fit’

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