



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Community arts and social change in rural Northern Ontario: the role of the 'Changes and Perspectives' youth photovoice project

Candidate Number: 41882
Course: PS 498 – Health, Community and Development
Word Count: 10 715
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Abstract

This study employed the photovoice methodology to investigate how partaking in a community arts project might allow youth in a deindustrialized community in rural Northern Ontario, Canada to collectively identify and address challenges facing them and how this process may affect their ability to lead social change. Findings suggest that the photovoice process, as an example of a community arts project, was able to create a temporary space for youth creativity which allowed for the achievement of critical consciousness through the renegotiation of community narratives and appropriation of positive identities; the fostering of bridging and bonding social capital; the development of in-between and metaphorical spaces, and the promotion of a receptive environment for the voice of youth to be both heard and heeded by local decision makers, thereby enabling youth-led social change to occur. Data was collected through focus groups with 43 youth and 8 adults in Blind River, Ontario. The study supports the use of art as a resource for social change.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Cathy Campbell for developing a program that allows this kind of work to be done and for her encouragement in overseeing this project. I additionally extend my gratitude to Fred Post, Gillian Lloyd, Stephanie Sutherland and the HCD 'family' – especially Jack - for their continued support and detailed feedback throughout my research. To my 'research assistant', Jon Cada for coming on board and believing in the project and the youth. To the Arts Network for Children and Youth and the Blind River Youth Council – and especially Linda Albright, Sally Hagman and Marg Calvert -for their invaluable help in moving the project forward in Blind River. And lastly, most importantly, thank you to the inspirational youth photographers of the North Shore. It was a privilege to work with you and to watch your creative and political spirits unfold.

Contents

ABSTRACT	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	7
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. SITUATING THE RESEARCH	2
2.1. <i>THE RESEARCHER'S INTEREST</i>	2
2.2. <i>MANAGING INTENTIONALITY</i>	2
2.3. <i>GEOGRAPHIC COMMUNITY AND PARTNERSHIPS</i>	3
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
3.1. <i>DEFINING COMMUNITY ARTS</i>	4
3.2. <i>COMMUNITY ARTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE</i>	4
4. CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	6
5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	7
5.1. <i>LINKING PHOTOVOICE WITH COMMUNITY ARTS</i>	7
6. METHODOLOGY	8
6.1. <i>CORPUS CONSTRUCTION</i>	8
6.2. <i>PHOTOVOICE PROCESS</i>	9
6.3. <i>DATA COLLECTION</i>	10
6.4. <i>ADULT FOCUS GROUP</i>	11
6.5. <i>ANALYSIS</i>	11
7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	12
7.1. <i>ADAPTED CONSCIOUSNESS</i>	13
7.2. <i>UNEQUAL ACCESS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL</i>	15
7.4. <i>LACK OF RECEPTIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT</i>	21
7.5. <i>CURRENT RESOURCES</i>	23
7.6. <i>IDENTIFYING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ARTS</i>	23
7.7. <i>UNPACKING THE EFFECTS OF THE COMMUNITY ARTS PROJECT</i>	28
8. LIMITATIONS	30
9. CONCLUSION	31
REFERENCES	34
APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM – YOUTH OLDER THAN 16	39
APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM – YOUTH UNDER 16	41
APPENDIX D – CONSENT TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED	43
APPENDIX E – TOPIC GUIDE FOR YOUTH BEFORE EXHIBITION	44
APPENDIX F - YOUTH FOCUS GROUP (POST EXHIBITION)	45
APPENDIX G – TOPIC GUIDE - ADULT FOCUS GROUP	46

APPENDIX H – SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT – YOUTH FOCUS GROUP	47
APPENDIX I – THEMATIC ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK	80
APPENDIX K – MEDIA RELEASE FOR PUBLIC EXHIBITION	92
APPENDIX L – BILINGUAL WELCOME/INFORMATION SIGN FOR PUBLIC EXHIBITION	93
APPENDIX M – LSE ETHICS APPROVAL	95
APPENDIX N – PHOTOVOICE PRESENTATION.....	98

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Example of Codes / Basic Themes.....	12
Figure 2. Adaptive consciousness diagram	13
Figure 3. Unequal access to social capital diagram.....	15
Figure 4. Negative community narrative diagram.....	18
Figure 6. Example photovoice photographs.....	24

1. Introduction

“The most profound cultural revolution in this part of the twentieth century has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation – in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in social life generally. Our lives have been transformed by the struggle of the margin...to reclaim some form of representation for themselves”

(Hall 1997, pg. 183)

Art can be described as the purest distillation of the human existence: through its stories, we relate to ourselves both how we envision our world, and our place in it. Before such narratives can be articulated and shared, however, the question is invariably and rightfully uttered: who has the right to speak for whom (Thomas and Rapaport 1996)?

As Spivak contends, those who control our discourses control the power of representation (Spivak 1988). The implications of this reality have ricocheted through human history – epitomized by questions of representation of the ‘other’ which emerged from the colonial encounter (Hall 1997) - and continue to make manifest in society’s rifts from which emerge inequalities related to gender, race and ethnicity and material resources. In ‘developed and developing’ settings alike it remains the case that marginalized groups who have limited access to the triumvirate contributors to a health-enabling community – symbolic, material and relational resources (Campbell and Cornish 2010) – lack also the ability to contribute to the dominant cultural narrative, leaving them little choice but to appropriate the negative representations offered to them by hegemonic discourses (Rappaport 2000). This contributes to their disempowerment as they remain “castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world” (Freire 1990, pg.31).

The aim of this study was to explore whether a community arts project could help bring a marginalized group of youth into representation in a de-industrialized rural Northern Ontario setting by facilitating ownership over a photovoice project. The study provides a novel contribution to the literature by using photovoice explicitly as a community art initiative, as well as focusing on a geographic area that has not previously been covered in the literature. It also supports claims that art can be used as a resource for grassroots social change.

The study is divided into eight sections. The first section provides background context for the research by describing the researcher's interest, the geographic context and the partnering organizations. The second section offers a definition for community arts followed by an overview of the wider literature related to community arts for social change. The next section will specify how this study contributes to the community arts for social change literature, followed by an outline of the study's research objectives. Following this, the conceptual framework will be described, linking the concept of community arts with the photovoice methodology. The Methodology section will then specify how data was gathered and analyzed. The Findings and Discussion section outlines the four major challenges facing youth in the community, explaining them within the context of four corresponding theoretical concepts: (1) Adapted Consciousness (2) Unequal Access to Social Capital (3) Negative Community Narratives and (4) Lack of Receptive Social Environment. The following two sections describe the impact of community arts and link these outcomes back to the four theoretical concepts. Lastly, limitations of the study are explained and conclusions drawn.

2. Situating the Research

2.1. The Researcher's Interest

The desire to conduct this research has been percolating within me for many years, inspired by my dual identities as a Northern Ontarian and an artist. Throughout my life I have grown more and more interested in unpacking the role the arts can play in community development, specifically as a tool for empowerment, social mobility and identity negotiation for youth living in rural communities in Canada. As such, the decision to return 'home' to engage in research on this topic was driven by personal passion as well as strong academic interest, and not without a view to influencing policy relating to community development in this unique peripheral area of Ontario.

2.2. Managing Intentionality

Given the esoteric research goals, personal investment and established relationships I brought into with the community with me, the local context was entered with a keen internal eye focused on managing intentionality and acting reflexively, which involved maintaining continued sensitivity to contexts and relationships. Considering that I hoped to enable the youth to take ownership over the project while maintaining some control over specific

elements of it, I aimed to acknowledge my position of power while remaining open to allowing them to shape the project (Sliep, Weingarten et al. 2004).

2.3. Geographic Community and Partnerships

Research was undertaken in Blind River, a rural municipality with a population of approximately 4000 located on the North Channel of Lake Huron in the Algoma District of Northern Ontario. The relatively large size of the municipality in comparison with the surrounding villages, hamlets and farming settlements positions it as a service provider to these smaller communities, with youth travelling up to 40 miles to attend one of the two high schools – one English-speaking and the other French-speaking - from which research participants were drawn. The town of Blind River has a high Francophone population, with 21% of its residents claiming French as one of their mother tongues (Statistics Canada 2006). The catchment area for its high schools also includes two First Nations communities: the Mississauga First Nation and the Serpent River First Nation.

Northern Ontario – the larger geographic area within which Blind River is situated - is a region without political autonomy (Hall and Donald 2009) that has been “consistently ignored in terms of policy development and services” (Clover 2007, pg. 515). Covering eight hundred thousand square kilometres, which constitutes ninety percent of the land mass of the province (Conteh 2011), it can be characterized by geographical vastness, low population densities and an abundance of wilderness: the area represents only six percent of the province’s population while encompassing seventy-eight percent of its woodlands (Hall and Donald 2009). The majority of Northern Ontario’s population resides in its five largest and geographically distant urban centres (Conteh 2011), leaving large areas of the region sparsely populated, typified by Blind River and its catchment communities.

The area has long been reliant on natural resource extraction - most notably forestry and mining - and these primary (in many cases sole) industries have been in decline for the past twenty years. As a result, “the picture of industrial stagnation...is reflected in socio-economic indicators like a high unemployment rate, low average income, and net outmigration relative to the rest of the province” (Conteh 2011, pg. 145).

The town of Blind River established the Blind River Youth Advisory Council in 1999 with the goal to “create opportunities for youth by youth, (supported by town council) to promote activities and events that will promote the Town of Blind River as being a Youth Friendly Community” (Municipality of Blind River, 2011). Currently ten adults sit on the council – seven of whom have voting privileges – as well as six youth. In 2009 Blind River engaged in a partnership with the Toronto-based Arts Network for Children and Youth (ANCY), a national non-profit arts service organization whose vision is to develop sustainable arts programming for children and youth in communities across Canada. The goal of this partnership was for the two organizations to work together to “support and expand arts programming for children and youth in Blind River” (Arts Network for Children and Youth, 2009). Both organizations contributed resources to support the photovoice project, with no further deliverables identified than for the researcher to run an after-school arts project for youth in the community.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Defining Community Arts

Community art is as fluid and as versatile a concept as the ideas it conjures, the thoughts it provokes, the populaces it is used by, and the contexts within which it develops. As such it has been defined in a number of ways. For this research the following definition was used: “a form of cultural practice in which art is produced and used by local people within their communities as an instrument for social change” (Madyaningrum and Sonn 2011, pg. 358).

3.2. Community Arts for Social Change

A scan of the literature related to ‘community art’ reveals that the concept has been appropriated for a number of social change purposes from the perspective of a wide range of academic disciplines.

As a brief overview, cultural theorists have seen it as a way to shift the concept of artistic appreciation away from a primarily elitist activity toward a participatory process for the masses (Clements 2011); gender theorists have explored its use as a method of enabling social activism by using it to reclaim the public sphere for the promotion the valuing of a multiplicity of voices and identities (Clover 2007); in the field of education it has been used as a means of

facilitating feelings of shared identity, belonging and cultural expression in multi-ethnic classrooms (El-Haj 2009; Anderson-Jim 2010); anthropologists have used it as a lens through which to observe civic participation, social activism and creating community (Lowe 2000; El-Haj 2009) and social psychologists have used it to address issues such as domestic violence and ethnic divisions in refugee camps in developing settings (Sliep and Meyer-Weitz 2003; Sliep, Weingarten et al. 2004).

In the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia the idea of using community arts for cultural regeneration has gained substantial popularity recently as a panacea for urban and rural deterioration left in the wake of de-industrialization. The development of 'creative' industries is seen as a means of meeting social aims such as increasing democracy, social justice, diversity and skill-building while also alleviating economic challenges by encouraging investment, increasing employment opportunities and spurring economic growth (Carey and Sutton 2004; Baker 2009; Purcell 2009; Grodach 2010).

However, it has been argued by some that such aims veer toward using the arts to promote elitism (Carey and Sutton 2004; Purcell 2009) and gentrification (Purcell 2009), and that for art to be useful for true community transformation it must be political, in that it should provide an opportunity for the community to take action themselves to develop their own collective efficacy and empowerment (Carey and Sutton 2004; Purcell 2009; Chapple and Jackson 2010). As such there has been increased recognition of the need for participatory arts projects that are responsive to local needs and developed in collaboration with communities, thus building community capacity to identify and address their challenges from the 'ground up' (Carey and Sutton 2004; Madyaningrum and Sonn 2011).

In the area of youth-focussed community arts, the literature reveals that a significant amount of work has been done in the UK and Australia with youth living in de-industrialized urban and rural communities where issues such as lack of employment opportunities and local amenities and social decline have led to compounding challenges for youth such as geographic isolation, mental illness, high rates of suicide, chronic youth unemployment, low education, substance abuse and family breakdown (Bradley, Deighton et al. 2004; Carey and Sutton 2004; Baker 2009; Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010). These youth were found to have formed marginalized sub-communities that are unable to avoid their own disadvantage, a predicament that is

compounded by dominant cultural narratives (Rappaport 2000) that paint youth as likely to engage in violent behaviour, as well as being apathetic and lazy (Bradley, Deighton et al. 2004; Carey and Sutton 2004).

This disturbing trend has been recognized as a problem by local and national governments in both countries, who have invested heavily in developing creative projects and youth arts spaces, which have been shown to contribute to social inclusion and skill development and have led to increased agency, self-esteem and self-efficacy as well as positive behavior changes such as decreased drug use, social integration and re-entering into the education system (Bradley, Deighton et al. 2004; Baker 2009; Purcell 2009; Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010).

4. Contribution to the literature and research objectives

Despite similar downward social trends in northern Ontario, Canada, such investments have not been made in this context, resulting in a lack of both programming and literature on the use of youth arts projects in this vast geographic region. Also, although the number of community arts organizations and projects have been increasing steadily in Canada's urban centres since the mid-1990s to address inner-city challenges (L. Albright, personal communication, April 5, 2011), academic literature exploring the potentialities for and outcomes of this important work is relatively non-existent.

There is an urgent need for research to explore the potential outcomes of community arts projects for marginalized groups, specifically youth, in the Canadian context. This study seeks to make a preliminary contribution to that effort by employing the photovoice methodology to explore the role that a community arts initiative can play in enabling youth in a rural Northern Ontario community to identify and tackle some of the disempowering challenges facing them.

This first aim also points to a secondary gap in the literature which this study fills; namely, its explicit linking of the photovoice method with community arts. As the literature review reveals, a substantial amount of writing exists which explores the use of community arts to bring about various forms of social change. The use of photovoice as a mechanism for reaching similar aims has also been explored in depth (Wang 2004; Foster-Fishman, Nowell et al. 2005;

Skovdal, Ogutu et al. 2009; Vaughan 2010). However, little work has been done to connect photovoice with community arts as an explicitly creative act that combines the benefits (and drawbacks) of each (Purcell 2009), a deficiency which this study aims to help remedy.

5. Conceptual framework

5.1. Linking Photovoice with Community Arts

The photovoice methodology was deemed most appropriate for this study for four reasons. Firstly, as a participatory research methodology it draws on Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness (Wang and Burris 1997; Wang, Yi et al. 1998) which emphasizes the need for communities to engage in *praxis* - the continuous, cyclical relationship between reflection and action - in order to bring about social change (Freire 1990; Vaughan 2010). *Praxis* can be said to come about when members of communities move from experiencing a sense of individual fatalism through to a point of collective action, by working together to identify structural challenges that contribute to their shared oppression, and devising ways to act together to overcome these challenges (Freire 1990). The potential for photovoice to bring about critical consciousness (Wang and Burris 1997; Foster-Fishman, Nowell et al. 2005; Vaughan 2010) in the youth community was therefore instrumental in choosing it as a methodology.

Secondly, as previously alluded to, photovoice was chosen because of its grounding in the artistic medium of photography which, like film, acts as a form of visual storytelling (El-Haj 2009). By inviting youth to explore their communities with their cameras, photovoice enables them to creatively present the stories of their community from their own perspective (Foster-Fishman, Nowell et al. 2005). Photovoice was therefore secondarily chosen for its potential to allow participating youth to use their artistic expression to develop new, empowering narratives - produced in solidarity with one another - that could challenge dominant cultural narratives which hitherto might have served to disempower them (Thomas and Rapaport 1996).

Thirdly, because of the photographic element of this project, photovoice was able to effectively act as both a research methodology and as a community arts initiative in this context. Using photography, youth collected data that uncovered the range of strengths and barriers they face in their community. Throughout this process, the researcher also collected

data through focus groups revealing the effect this process had on the youth. Photovoice was thus chosen for its ability to play the Janus-faced part of being both the subject of the research and the means of conducting the research.

Lastly, photovoice was chosen because the process ends with a culminating photography exhibition, whose aim is to provide a forum for decision and policy makers to dialogue with the photographers (Wang and Burris 1997). When working with youth this element of the process has the potential to create a rarely-available 'in-between space' where youth can connect to individuals who hold different levels of power and whose decisions directly influence the lives of youth within the community (Vaughan 2010). This in turn could potentially foster the development of receptive social environments where decision makers could possibly begin to 'heed the push from below' (Campbell, Cornish et al. 2010) by taking into account youth perspectives and adjusting policy decisions accordingly.

6. Methodology

6.1. Corpus Construction

The project closely followed the photovoice process laid out by Wang (Wang and Burris 1997), although it was adapted in certain areas to reflect the project's community arts ethos. Ethics approval was granted by the LSE and the Blind River Youth Advisory Council [Appendix M]. All names used in this study have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.

The selection framework included youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty who attend one of the two high schools in Blind River. Participants were recruited using convenience selection in four distinct contexts with the aim of saturating the diversity of opinions (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000).

The first group of youth was recruited in the English-speaking high schools by hanging posters [Appendix A] and reading announcements over the PA system in collaboration with school administrators and teachers. Although both of these recruitment techniques began two weeks in advance of the researcher's arrival in the community, it proved to be an unsuccessful method of rallying interest in the project. Unfolding relationships with two community

gatekeepers, whose idea of how the project should progress was quickly revealed to be at odds with the original research design, further complicated this.

Due to these limitations, on arrival in the community the researcher was required to switch recruitment techniques to visiting visual art and music classes in person to recruit more participants by making brief verbal presentations outlining the key objectives of the project. At this point interested students were invited to sign up for the project and provide their email addresses in order to communicate with the researcher about the project. Those who did so were given informed consent forms to sign [Appendix B] or take home for their parents to sign if they were under the age of sixteen [Appendix C].

The verbal presentation and signup process was then repeated with three other groups of youth: from the French-speaking high school; a local social services agency that works with youth who are accessing social services personally or through their guardians; and the Outdoor Education class at the English-speaking high school.

The latter class serves boys who are identified as being not college or university-bound and are at high risk of leaving the education system for various reasons (L. Gunning, personal communication, June 23, 2011). Around half of the class population identifies as First Nations or Metis and the curriculum centers around activities such as hiking and chainsaw training as well as traditional First Nations learnings (J. Boyer, personal communication, May 15, 2011). Because of the flexible curriculum of the class, it was agreed between the youth, their two teachers and the researcher that each aspect of the photovoice project would be replicated with the Outdoor Education group during school hours.

6.2. Photovoice Process

Once youth were recruited, the first after-school introductory session [Appendix N] was held at the local Marina. This included an overview of the project and discussion about the ethical implications of photography, including intrusion of privacy, disclosing embarrassing facts and placing subjects in a false light (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001). It was clarified that photos taken of others without the subject's informed consent could not be used for any purposes related to the project, and Informed Consent to be Photographed forms were distributed [Appendix D].

Youth then chose the “Changes and Perspectives” theme for the project, which they felt would allow them to portray the youth perspective on the community in terms of changes which had already occurred as well as those they would like to see happen. They also decided to take over planning the exhibition. Youth were then asked to spend the next two weeks taking photographs – using personal digital cameras - related to the theme they had chosen.

Following this introductory session the youth met with the researcher after school in either the Marina or the local high school on three more occasions: once for photography training, again for photo editing training and lastly to choose their photos and write descriptions, prior to the final exhibition.

It was clarified that taking photos as well as training, focus group and event planning sessions was completely voluntary. As a result, while thirty youth in total participated in some aspect of the project, twenty-two presented photos at the exhibition.

6.3. Data Collection

Data was collected through five recorded focus group sessions and an introductory session. Written photo descriptions were provided by youth but were not analyzed given the limited amount of additional data they provided.

Focus group sessions were conducted following Bauer and Gaskell’s (2000) outline and ranged from one to two and a half hours in length. They were recorded and later transcribed verbatim using the Express Scribe software program. Focus groups were chosen as a qualitative research method for their ability to allow consensus to emerge and a ‘thick description’ of issues to be generated through group discussion, (Bauer and Gaskell 2000) as well as for their potential to allow feelings of group solidarity and collective critical thinking to develop.

Two topic guides for the focus group sessions were developed: one for youth before the exhibition [Appendix E] and one for youth following the exhibition [Appendix F]. Topic guide questions were informed by an in-depth exploration of the theoretical literature, conversations with experienced colleagues and a prior familiarity with the field of research (Bauer and Gaskell 2000).

6.4. Adult Focus Group

While the initial goal for the focus groups was to only involve youth, following illuminating conversations with adults about the project, an additional focus group with adults [Appendix G] was held in an effort to triangulate the data by introducing another perspective into the research (Bauer and Gaskell 2000). Adults were recruited using convenience recruitment selection, with adults who work with youth in some capacity in the community being invited to take part via email. Eight adults were recruited in this way, which included teachers, social service workers, and adult members of the Blind River Youth Advisory Council.

6.5. Analysis

Data was coded using thematic qualitative analysis as outlined by Attride-Stirling (Attride-Stirling 2001).

The focus group transcripts [Appendix H] were coded as four separate groups of data: (1) the 'Outdoor Ed' boys (2) the youth before the exhibition (3) the youth after the exhibition and (4) the adults. This was done to allow separate codes and themes to organically emerge from each group, anticipating significant findings related to differing and converging opinions on key points.

No preconceived themes or codes were applied to the data throughout the coding process. Verbatim transcripts were first summarized using a line-by-line syntactical unit (Bauer and Gaskell 2000) with the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. During the initial stage the transcripts were summarized descriptively, leading to 850 data extracts between the four groupings of data. These were printed and merged by hand with like units into larger categories called codes. Through this highly iterative and systematic merging process, the data was reduced to 306 accurate codes. Following this stage, codes were grouped into Basic Themes based on emerging patterns of similarity within codes (Attride-Stirling 2001) as displayed in Figure 1.

Codes	Basic themes identified
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth are used to going elsewhere for entertainment • Many youth had never been to closest city • Need to travel 1.5 hours to go to a movie • Many youth do not have family resources to leave community • Transportation is a challenge for after school activities 	Geographic isolation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining enrolment a factor in low youth involvement • Local industries and businesses declining, shutting down • Young adults don't return to community • Youth who stay end up working minimum wage jobs • Shrinking population endemic across Northern Ontario • Enrolment in schools rapidly decreasing • Blind River is a retirement community 	Decline of industries Lack of employment opportunities Shrinking population & enrolment in schools

Figure 1: Example of Codes / Basic Themes

Basic Themes were then grouped together to form Organizing Themes. Organizing Themes linked the core ideas of the Basic Themes together while also intuiting larger latent assumptions within the grouped data (Attride-Stirling 2001). These latent assumptions then coalesced to form Global Themes.

At this point the entire data set was entered into Microsoft Excel. Since common themes had emerged across the four sets of data, all four sets were now merged into the same framework, using colour coding to distinguish between (1) youth before photovoice (2) youth after photovoice (3) adults and (4) limitations of photovoice [Appendix I]. The goal in maintaining these distinctions was to compare adult data with youth data, and examine how and whether opinions of youth changed in relation to key topics before and after the exhibition. It became clear that the Outdoor Education data set was not discrete enough to remain segregated, and was merged into the “youth before photovoice” colour code. The final product was then translated into diagrams representing the relationship of the data within each global theme in a visual format, as seen in Figures 2 through 5.

7. Findings and Discussion

This chapter is comprised of eight sections. The first four reflect the major challenges facing youth in the community, linking them with four key theoretical concepts: (1) Adapted Consciousness and Transitive Thought (2) Unequal Access to Social Capital (3) Negative Community Narratives and (4) Lack of Receptive Social Environment. Each section is introduced by a diagram that highlights how the challenge was affected by the photovoice process. This is followed by a Current Strengths section, which outlines existing community

resources youth identified. In the following two sections the impact of community arts is first identified and then unpacked by linking each outcome back to the four theoretical concepts introduced in the first section. Lastly, limitations of the study are explained.

7.1. Adapted Consciousness

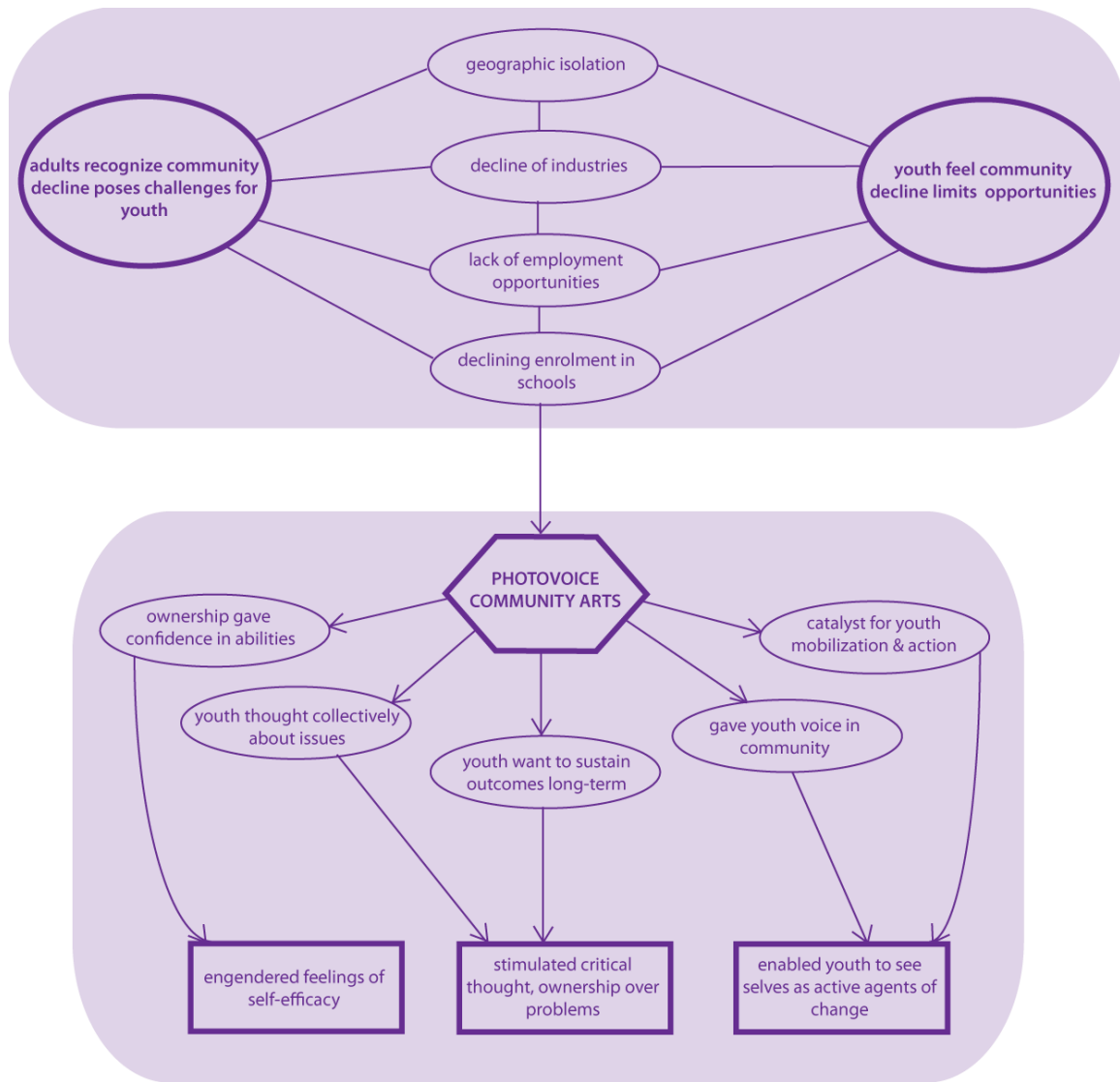


Figure 2. Adaptive consciousness diagram

Both adults and youth spoke at length about the socio-economic decline of the region and the negative impact it has had on the community. Geographic isolation, demise of industries, lack of employment opportunities, shrinking population and declining enrolment in schools were

among issues raised. For youth, this decline linked directly to challenges such as less course choice in school and lack of after-school programming due to low participation. The need for a youth space in the community came up frequently. Youth felt there was nothing to do and nowhere to go, leading to boredom, social isolation and increased substance abuse:

Troy *There's nothing else to do but do drugs.*

Randy *Mmhmm. If we had something maybe yeah...*

Jake *Yeah if we had something else to do we probably wouldn't do it.*

Troy *No we'd probably do that thing while we are high.*

Jake *Yeah probably.*

Randy *Yeah but at least you'd be able to be out doing more of those instead of sitting there.*

Troy *Instead of just doing that every day.*

Randy *Instead of just burning out all day.*

Youth agreed that many things needed to change, and it would be easier to take negative photos than positive ones for the project. At the same time they were faced with too many challenges to enact change themselves, including limits in funding, a lack of support from decision makers and personal barriers:

Ben *You really need connections. Because it's...I don't know, it's a very nice perception that okay you're a youth, you are the youth and you have the power to make change. That is very true. But for youth to be able to keep up in their school work and plan for their future and in the meantime also prepare and get involved in their community? It is very...it is a very difficult thing to do.*

These findings point to youth experiencing a general sense of fatalism, suggesting they are in a state of adapted consciousness, in which they feel consistently oppressed by social structures that are beyond their control (Freire 1990). In this state individuals are unable to either envision alternative realities or develop the confidence to attempt to change their current circumstances (Campbell and MacPhail 2002). Because these negative views of the community are so pervasive, they may have the effect of stigmatizing the entire community as a place in stagnation or decline, which can negatively affect individual and group self-identity (Howarth 2002).

7.2. Unequal Access to Social Capital

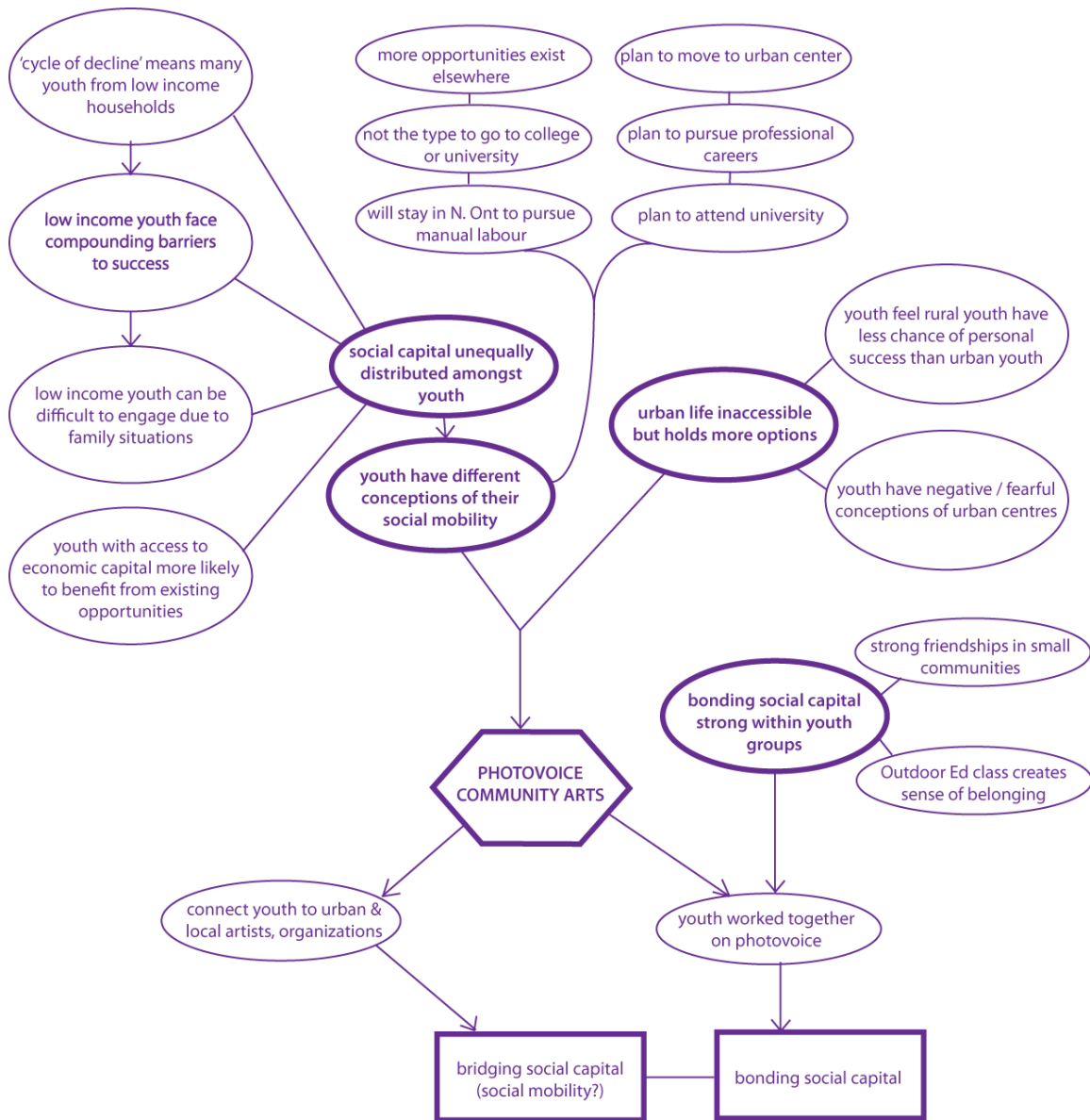


Figure 3. Unequal access to social capital diagram

The adult focus group session illuminated additional ways in which that the community's socio-economic situation creates challenges for youth, with adults describing a 'cycle of decline' that is taking place due to the out-migration of skilled youth:

Lacey You have the high school student that has a goal, that has the skills, has the supports, that moves on and potentially doesn't come back and what stays behind is that less-skilled, less-supported youth that ends up being a

young mother, a young father, unemployed, looking to social services for an income because jobs are so limited, and it just spirals from there because that's now what their future is. It's a cycle of decline. Because it's what they see, they haven't broken out of it, and that's what they're expecting for their life.

They noted that this scenario leads to parents experiencing a range of challenges, which could include financial stress, low self esteem, mental health issues, domestic abuse and illiteracy. Family contexts such as these present a number of barriers that could prevent youth from accessing the same opportunities as their peers:

Lacey *My first thought would be a perceived class difference, where the child, the youth wouldn't want to engage for that self-esteem, [they would think] "I'm not as good as that class, and wouldn't fit in". I think they're scared to participate in extra-curricular activities if they think there's going to be somebody that, you know, might be dressed better than them, might be smarter than them...a lot of them, they don't have family background supports that would even encourage them to engage in these activities... literacy is such an issue that parents may not even know what's going on outside of their home...the financial, you know not having, maybe they think it's going to cost, maybe there will be cost...they don't have the money, they don't want to ask for the money...I think a lot of it may be the fear of interaction with others because the home situation is so difficult that they live in a very isolated um "I don't want to go outside of this"...even though it may not be safe they think it's safe because it's their family.*

Because of these challenges, adults went on to explain that while lower-income youth serve to benefit from opportunities outside of school, they are amongst the least likely to engage in these activities. They also noted that children of parents who were involved in community affairs were more likely to engage in such activities themselves, with the opposite also holding true.

Discussion amongst youth about their post-secondary plans reflected these social divisions. While some spoke of planning to attend university in large urban centres and pursue professional careers such as pharmacy, medicine and law, others did not see any kind of post-secondary option as being available to them, saying they would remain within Northern Ontario and pursue manual labour in the forestry and mining sectors.

A shared belief amongst youth was their significant disadvantage compared to youth in urban settings. Youth spoke of urban centres as alien places that are big, scary and dangerous. Even youth with high academic achievement who outlined specific trajectories related to university and professional careers saw themselves as inferior to their urban counterparts:

Warren *If you want to go to a big university you have to have like a ninety-seven average. Like I want to go to Waterloo. People who graduate from highschoools in Toronto, compared to people that graduate from a high school in like Blind River, my ninety seven right now would probably only be considered an eighty-seven in Waterloo, because the town is so small there's such less curriculum that they would drop it down about, like ten percent.*

These findings point to a secondary challenge youth face in their community: unequal access to social capital leading to limited social mobility. Putnam (Putnam 2000) distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding social capital, which stems from strong networks within social contexts; and bridging social capital, which is created by linking communities with external entities who can provide various kinds of political or economic support. Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1997) contends that each form of capital (cultural, economic and social), like power, is unequally distributed in society and as such both contributes to and stems from social inequality.

The 'cycle of decline' described by the adults suggests that youth with less access to economic capital are less able to partake in opportunities outside of school than others, leading to less development of social and cultural capital. Furthermore, although youth agreed that their social mobility is limited by the small town context, certain youth feel they have enough social mobility to leave this environment and pursue professional careers, while others have much more limited conceptions of the possibilities open to them. The youth's shared view of urban centres as intimidating, unwelcoming places also points to a lack of bridging social capital connecting youth to the resources available in urban centres, further undermining their social mobility.

7.3. Negative Community Narratives

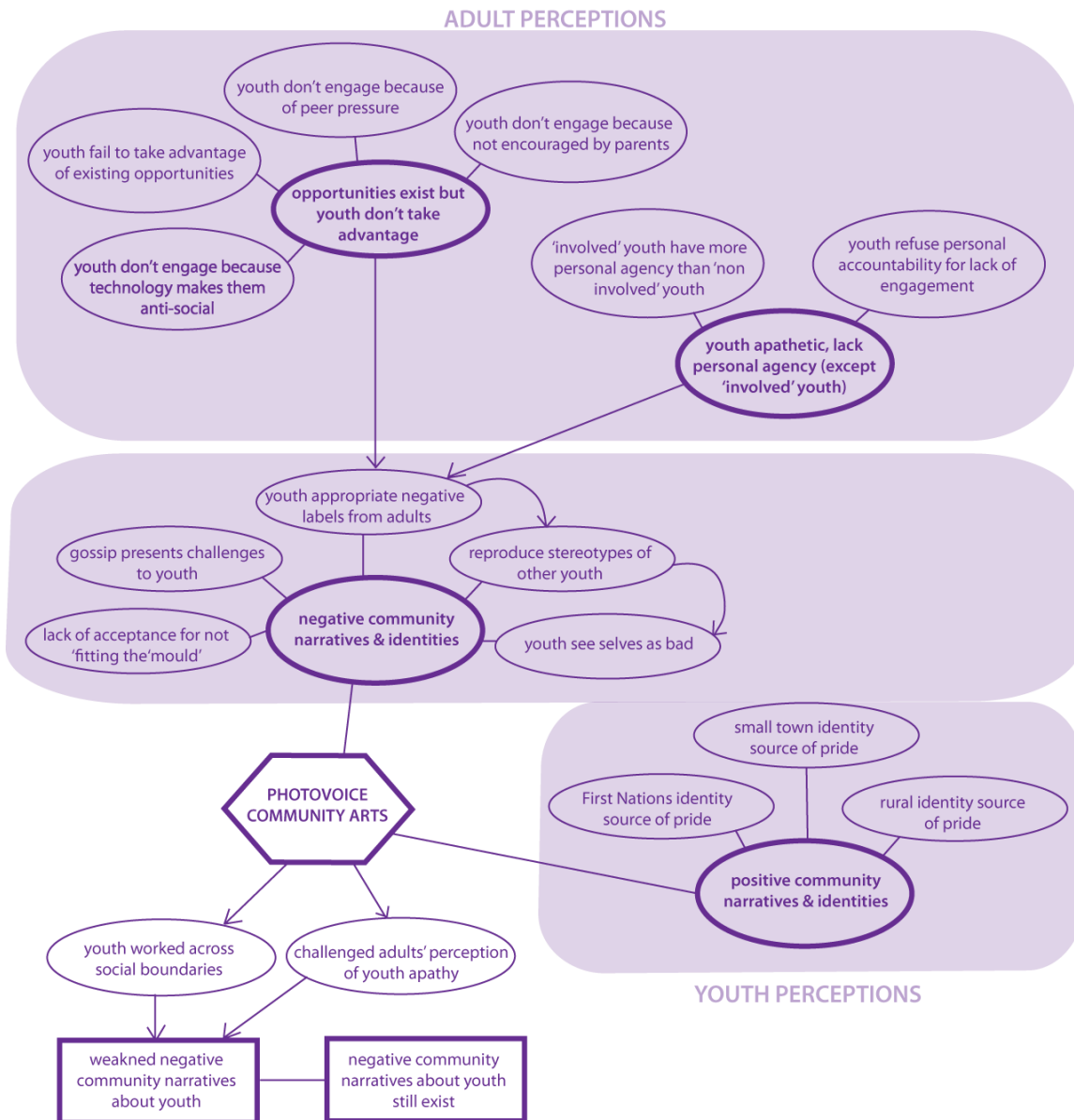


Figure 4. Negative community narrative diagram

In addition to structural barriers and unequal access to social capital, youth were found to be facing pervasive negative perceptions perpetuated by adults as well as fellow youth. For example, although adults expressed support of youth having their own space in the community, past efforts in establishing youth projects had failed, leading adults to doubt youth's ability to identify their own needs:

Barbara *Every single student said they wanted a place to go to call their own. And we were in this catch twenty-two offering them Saturday night at the Legion...that was the overwhelming thing that everyone said that they wanted and they just didn't support it because the cool people didn't go. Or because there wasn't booze. Or both. But it's hard for us who are not, you know we're all on the same side of the coin. We want to support you in giving you things to do in our community, we recognize that maybe there's not enough things to do. But how do we get them to support what they say they want, I don't know.*

While some adults recognized that youth wanted more opportunities, it was also expressed that many activities already existed, and that youth would complain regardless of what was available. They named a number of personal and familial barriers they felt inhibited youth engagement, such as their parents not encouraging them to be involved; spending too much time playing video games; having a heightened sense of entitlement and an 'entertain me' attitude; and being afraid to take part in something new due to peer pressure. Opinions about youth apathy were particularly evident:

Roxanne *I think it's apathy with the kids. They go to school, they go home and play games on their computers.*

Barbara *I'm hoping that our youth learn to say something more than there's nothing to do in this community. Because to me that's a copout.*

Youth, in turn, were aware of these perceptions and accepted that they reflected the youth community:

Ben *[Adults] probably think the youth are a very apathetic bunch that go out smoking at break.*

Researcher *Okay, um...is that an image that you'd like to change as a whole?*

Ben *It would be nice to change as a whole, but the ratio is kind of accurate.*

Youth also communicated negative stereotypes of one another:

Jody *...you know why a lot of the youth might be getting into drugs and stuff, because their parents do that stuff and then the parents just don't have any initiative to teach their children...the adults don't even like, they don't teach them proper, you know basics for life.*

The issue of gossip also came up frequently as having significant influence on youth's lives. Comments were made about 'everyone watching everything you do' and youth being pressured to 'fit into a mould', making them afraid to do anything but conform to expectations. Related to this was the necessity and difficulty of preserving a good reputation, which was described as 'brittle'. They said that once a bad reputation was established it would be impossible to escape, and could affect entire families as well as job prospects, limiting your personal success within the community. Youth in the Outdoor Education group related specific experiences about negative reputations they had acquired in their community:

Randy *We painted this lady's house in Spanish, me and him, and then she burnt it down like two weeks later and tried to blame it on me and him.*

Josh *Yeah it was like a month later and she tried to blame it on us saying we were the last ones around.*

Randy *Saying we lit it on fire with turpentine. Poured it all over the house. She like called the cops and stuff.*

Josh *Yeah it was like are you fucking kidding me? It was like a month ago you idiot.*

Randy *Yeah so that's why we don't like Spanish, 'cause nobody likes us kids. They just think we're rebels.*

Although these youth did not feel this reputation was deserved, they felt they had no choice but to appropriate it:

Randy *What I think it is, is that they gave us a shitty label. So now we're like fuck it, if you want to give us that label that's what we'll do. Might as well do it then.*

Josh *They say we do all this shit so it's like fuck it, like whatever. We might as well just do it.*

Brian *Yeah but we don't even do anything any more, so we shouldn't take that label at all.*

These findings suggest that youth in these communities are struggling to negotiate negative community narratives, defined as "the shared narratives that people tell again and again about their own and other communities" (Thomas and Rapaport 1996, pg. 320). These narratives affect the way in which people form their identities as well as the way in which power is distributed in a community, and when appropriated can be such powerful forces that individuals find it difficult to escape them or reinvent new stories for themselves (Rapaport 1995). This is especially true for youth, who traditionally have little 'narrative authority' to decide whose stories and voices are given precedence (Mattingly 2001). What is left is for youth to appropriate the negative social identities that are offered to them, bending to the

fact that “stigmatizing representations actually produce the realities they symbolize. They can operate, that is, as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Howarth 2002, pg. 250).

7.4. Lack of receptive social environment

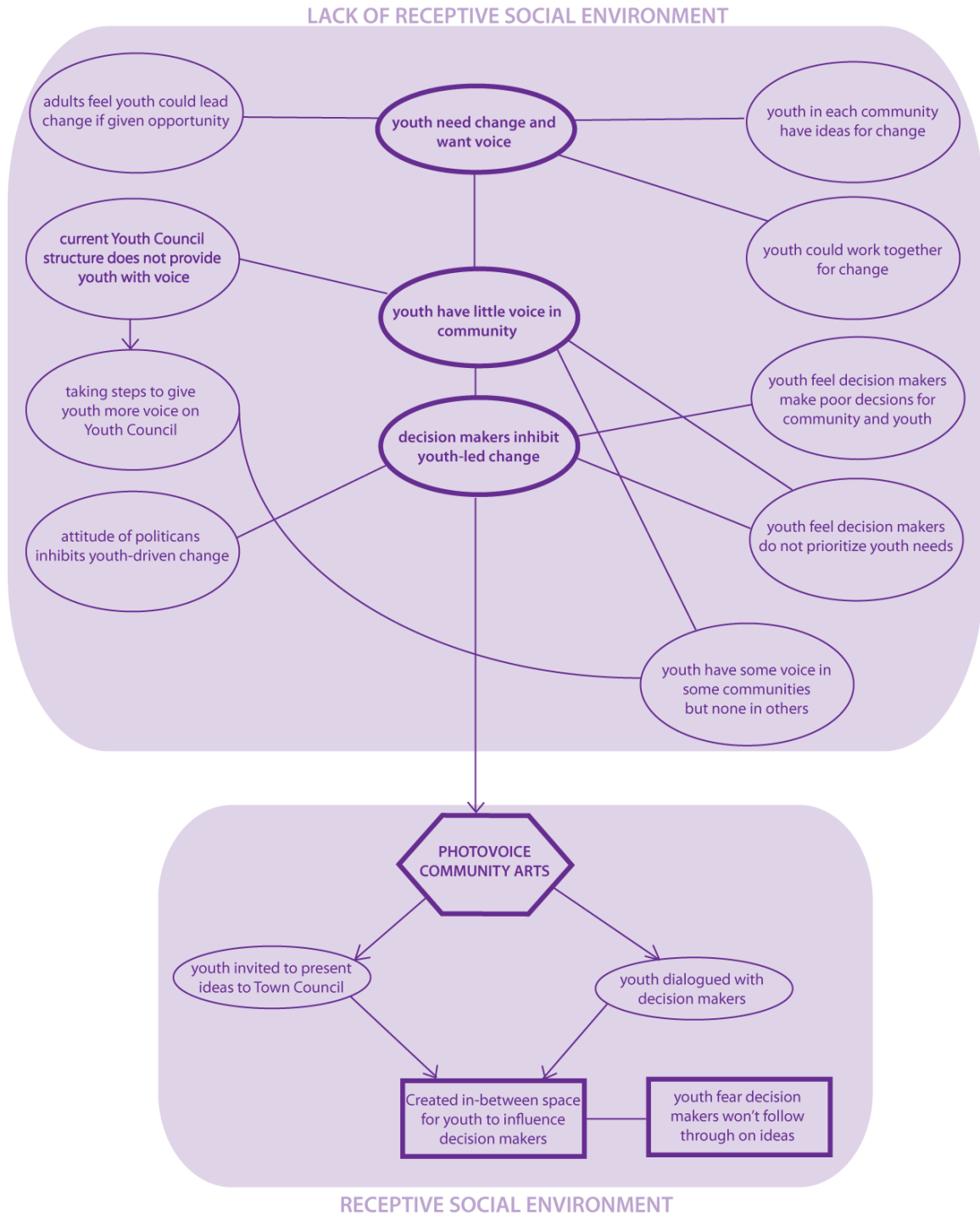


Figure 5. Receptive social environments diagram

Despite the negative narratives that were shown to exist between the adult and youth communities, the adults also communicated a strong desire for youth to have more voice. It was pointed out that certain members of the Youth Council were particularly invested in taking steps to allow that to happen within that framework. However, certain politicians and political structures were seen to inhibit such changes being made:

Barbara *So we want the youth to take ownership, our terms of reference encourage the youth to be leading this group, not the adults. And as long as the adults have this overwhelming presence in the group, the youth aren't speaking. The youth can sit through a whole youth council and when Rex was on the group they even said yes, but I mean Rex just by his very demeanour was intimidating, so they really never said anything...you know there was a fear in the room. The atmosphere was not conducive to talking.*

The youth participants echoed this sentiment, noting that although there are youth on the Council who should theoretically influence policy in that arena, the adults consistently failed to take into account youth opinions and would often override ideas they presented for new projects. For youth this was only one cause for a wider sense of disillusionment with local decision makers, whom they felt disregarded youth needs. It was frequently mentioned that decision makers consistently make poor fiscal decisions, rankling youth who would link this with subsequent lack of investment in youth projects. They also described feeling that adults prioritize their own needs over those of youth, while at the same time expecting youth to take the initiative to create their own opportunities:

Randy *They said if we want a skate park we gotta go door to door and ask for donations. It was just like yeah, if you guys wanted a skate park you'd be down there the next day building one, but just because it's for us you're not going to do it. We should just get a tractor and build our own dirtbike track and shit right downtown. Right through the highway and everything.*

For youth this meant that although they had ideas for change, and saw the potential for youth to work together to enact that change, their lack of voice in the community and the consistent dismissal of youth opinions by decision makers left little room for that to happen.

These findings suggest that, by inviting youth to sit on the Youth Council and make suggestions for youth programming, local decision makers took the first step toward creating a 'receptive social environment', defined as a place where the powerful are willing to listen to

those with less power (Campbell, Cornish et al. 2010). Some movement has been made toward this aim by creating a space for the former to listen to the latter, thus allowing 'transformative communication' to occur. However, the gesture falls short of creating a truly receptive social environment, where adults not only listen to but are also willing to 'heed the demands' of the youth, because youth are consistently overpowered by adults (Campbell, Cornish et al. 2010). Therefore, although an existing institution has effectively been adjusted to enable public engagement by youth - thus acting as an 'invited space' where dialogue can occur between various stakeholders - the fact that this space is already permeated with power differences disallows true change to occur (Cornwall 2004).

7.5. Current Resources

While much of the conversations centered around negative aspects of their social contexts, youth spoke positively about certain aspects of living in their communities, such as the tight-knit nature of small towns and the beauty of and proximity to natural settings. First Nations youth spoke about pride in their cultural heritage, and all youth spoke favorably about local events and festivals that brought the community together. Also common was an expressed closeness within youth social groups, acting as a source of support for youth. This came across particularly strongly in the Outdoor Education group, where youth spoke highly of the class as a place where they belong and are respected by the teachers and one another, making it easier for them to attend school.

7.6. Identifying the impact of community arts

The photovoice project provided an avenue for youth to use their creative abilities to speak to adults about issues that concerned them, both in person and through their photography. Teachers, community members and local politicians - including the Mayor, local councilors and the Member of Parliament - attended the public exhibition, and actively engaged in discussions with youth about their photos.

The final photographs (Figure 6) relayed messages such as the desire for more arts programming; a call for less pollution; the negative impact of drugs in the community as well as the general lack of opportunities available to youth.

	<p>Living in a small town, often it feels like youth don't have the same experience as others. One thing we still have is our voice. But there's a difference between having a voice and speaking. Are the youth making their voice heard? Are they even trying? To make the changes you need to speak.</p>
	<p>A disadvantage of Blind River is that everybody wants to leave and no one wants to come, but why....? We should find ways to keep the people in Blind River.</p>
	<p>This picture shows that kids these days still have a feeling for the culture. The culture was never lost – it's still there. The Native Resource Room is somewhere to come and do your work by yourself – there's not so much distraction like in a normal class. And the programs Reggie sets up for us are awesome.</p>

Figure 6. Example photovoice photographs

Positive messages included the joy of being a young mother, appreciation of First Nations culture, cross-cultural understanding and the benefits of growing up with an exposure to wilderness settings.

Youth spent a number of hours planning the exhibition, which included obtaining donations from local businesses [Appendix J], inviting media [Appendix K], setting up the space, planning the speeches – which they also presented - and curating the exhibition [Appendix L].

Following this collective effort youth spoke of themselves as a group:

Anne *I think it would be a good idea to have like another continued project of this. I think it's easier now that we kind of have worked together that we could like do another one.*

The photovoice project also created links between the youth community, local artists and other professionals. An artist and a retired new media teacher presented the photography and photo editing training sessions, while a woman who owns a framing company taught the youth how to mat and frame each of their photos. Local media ran stories about the event in the town paper and a regional radio show. Two youth also took part in curatorial training at the regional art gallery, as described below by one of the participating youth and the adult who accompanied her:

Rayna *That was fun. Yeah. There's a lot to actually know about it though, that I didn't even know. I thought it would be really simple but she was like going off about all these things and I was like wow.*

Maria *Well the two girls that I took up to [Sault Ste. Marie] to the art gallery, when we started out from Blind River I was kind of forcing the conversation to get started...but on the way back, I didn't have to say a word. They wouldn't stop talking about the photographs [the curator] had shown them and this and that they were just so excited...I had left them there because I had some commitments that I had to go to and when I came back she said "what two beautiful ambassadors from Blind River" she said so they were really engaged with everything and I told them that on the way home and you could just see the smiles.*

Youth said they felt the project had helped them express themselves, and had showed the community that youth can speak and how those voices can be used:

Jody *I just like the way that you can like express yourself more. I don't know, just how you get...like I think that lots of people realized that the youth can speak as well and how it can be used, it let people know that...*

Anne *It opened doors.*

Jody *Yeah.*

Anne ...I think it was like an opening to say we wanted art things. Like we just needed someone to get us started.

Following the exhibition youth spoke about how the photovoice process had allowed them to see art-making differently:

Tanner Um I...it made me feel good. Because adults finally...their eyes are opened when we're expressing ourselves through some kind of art. And I noticed that. I don't know, it just...it was good to hear all the adults talking about the pictures and seeing a lot of the adults there actually taking time to read what was written about it.

Youth said they had surprised themselves by following through with the project, and spoke of the process as having encouraged them to try something they didn't know they would succeed at, and to step out of their comfort zone. The level of ownership they felt over the project also appeared to be a motivating factor:

Anne I like that if you wanted something different about the photovoice project, if you just went out and were like "oh I want this", then you could have it. It wasn't like an adult saying "I don't think that's such a great idea because..."

As this quote further demonstrates, youth felt that a strength of the project was that the ability to see it through from start to finish themselves without adults dictating how it should happen, which demonstrated to the community that youth are capable of running their own projects. Following the exhibition youth decided they should form a 'Youth Mob', which could work together to develop further projects, and used words such as 'movement' and 'revolution' to refer to the outcome of the project.

Anne Yeah I like see us, I mean I might be a little weird, but I see us as like a mob. Like we're just like a mob of people, like youth, and then things we want to do we just put together that have to do with art.

Ben Instead of having like adults constantly supervising it would be more youth-organized kind of thing. Such as you would have a youth committee to work with every year to organize all the different events going on.

The photovoice process facilitated youth working together across social boundaries, which led to youth seeing one another from a new perspective:

Tanner *It changed my perspective to see how things can come together when youth actually work together and you know, not...like I know some people who are at each other's throats because they don't see eye to eye. You don't have to see eye to eye with somebody. You just have to understand where they're coming from.*

In the adult focus group, the adults expressed surprise at how many youth had followed through with taking part in the project. Similarly, a number of teachers at the public exhibition commented on how the photos and descriptions of photos by youth in the Outdoor Education group exceeded their expectations in terms of both the artistic quality and the profundity of their messages.

In her speech the Mayor expressed enthusiasm about the project and the importance of the messages, declaring that the adults are listening, and raised the idea of enlarging some of the photos to place on buildings around community. After the project youth were also invited by the Mayor to attend a Town Council meeting where they would be able to bring the ideas raised in the project directly into the policy arena:

Researcher *What do you guys think the next step is?*

Anne *Get a youth centre.*

Jody *Well the chair of the youth council, she said that everyone who took part in the project should come out to the town council meeting and share our ideas there.*

In the focus group following the photovoice exhibition the idea of a youth arts space became central to discussion, with youth being visibly motivated by the idea of requesting such a space in the Town Council meeting. They envisioned the space kick-starting various projects such as theatre workshops, dance competitions, and a community garden. They highlighted that the potential space would act as the starting point for youth projects going forward:

Tanner *I think anything would really work if we had the space for it. Like if we actually had the space for it, and people wanted to do it and they set their mind to it. There's a number of things that can be done. The list is endless.*

Following the exhibition, youth agreed that the messages they were trying to send reached the right people, and that a number of adults seemed genuinely interested in addressing the issues they had raised:

Jody *The adults that I talked to did. Like they would read it and I would explain it and they would be like "oh that's good! That's very good!" and they'd be like "I really like that. I get that." And then they'd launch into a discussion about it.*

The photovoice project also created connections between youth and urban centres through the project's partnership with the Toronto-based Arts Network for Children and Youth (ANCY). In addition to providing funding support, the Executive Director of ANCY helped youth in the final stages of organizing the exhibition by providing transportation for last minute needs. She made a brief speech congratulating youth at the exhibition, as did the Mayor and the local Member of Parliament. At the time of writing ANCY is set to host a national youth arts conference which all participating photographers are invited to attend, and where the photovoice photographs will be exhibited.

7.7. Unpacking the effects of the community arts project

By encouraging ownership over the project and positioning youth as artists with a political message, the photovoice project enabled youth to challenge negative community narratives, by offering counter-narratives and corresponding identities as artistic, engaged youth with the capacity and desire to make change when given the chance. This transition was noted both by youth themselves and adults who saw them take ownership of the project and produce artistic pieces with insightful messages. In this way the project supported the idea that community art, as a means of representation, is a powerful force in shaping social identities, and made use of its power to act as a space for resistance by re-allocating 'narrative authority' from the powerful to the marginalized (Mattingly 2001).

The project also facilitated the development of bonding social capital between youth who worked together across social groups toward a common aim. Bridging social capital within the community was facilitated by linking youth with local artists and professionals as well as by providing media coverage which, anecdotally, may have served an additional function of legitimizing the project in the eyes of the wider community. Bridging ties will also likely be formed between artists and arts organizations in urban centres through the upcoming arts conference. While the actual effect of this experience is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain, the potential exists for it to enhance their views of their personal social mobility by

lessening the intimidation of urban spaces and providing an opportunity to interact with urban youth.

By creating a forum where youth could directly engage with decision makers, the photovoice project also confronted the idea that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Foucault 1991, pg. 252) by providing an alternative, ‘in-between’ space (Vaughan 2010) where some of the power lost in the Youth Council was able to be re-appropriated at the photovoice exhibition. Through collective creativity and focus group discussions, the project also provided a metaphorical space for youth that acted as a ‘free space’ or ‘legitimate space’ where they felt safe and secure in sharing personal stories, developing their civic engagement and engaging in the collective re-imagining of political discourses (Bradley, Deighton et al. 2004; El-Haj 2009). By doing so it provided a mini counterpublic for them to build confidence and practice their political messages to bring into the public sphere (Fraser 1992). Making use of art in this way to re-shift the power dynamics that permeate public spaces supports Cornwall’s (2004) contention that “unleashing people’s creativity, and drawing on pictures, drama, song and other forms of expression...can prove surprisingly valuable in giving people who are so often ignored a chance to have their say” (pg. 86).

These findings suggest that through these processes, the photovoice project enabled youth to work past the state of adapted consciousness through to critical consciousness, which involves individuals coming together as a collective to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire 1990, pg. 31). By enabling youth to work together to identify and communicate their needs through photography, youth were able to engage in collective critical thinking. However, while this moment of critical reflection is necessary it is not sufficient, and must be joined with action in order to obtain transformative power (Freire 1990). By deciding to create a Youth Mob to carry projects forward on their own, and bring ideas for a youth art space to the Town Council, youth also took collective action, thereby reaching a state of *praxis*. The invitation for them to engage directly with the Town Council may also have the potential to foster a truly receptive social environment (Campbell, Cornish et al. 2010) if the ideas raised by the project are heeded by decision makers.

In sum, the photovoice process was able to create a temporary space for youth creativity which allowed for the achievement of critical consciousness through the renegotiation of community narratives and appropriation of positive identities; the fostering of bridging and bonding social capital; and the development of an in-between space and potential receptive environment for the views of youth to be heard and heeded by policy makers. In this way the project enabled some degree of youth-led social change to take place.

8. Limitations

Although the photovoice allowed youth to see one another differently by working across social boundaries, a lingering element of intra-group discrimination remained a factor after the project was complete, as highlighted in the following exchange:

Anne *You know what, I really didn't think Ryan was going to come out. It really shocked me.*

Ben *I was shocked that Ryan came out too.*

Anne *It really shocked me that Ryan came. I don't mean...*

Jody *Yeah me too. I don't mean...I don't know.*

Anne *Not that I don't think that Ryan did a good job in this project, just normally he's not really involved in things.*

Ryan *I'm not actually a gangster.*

Anne *Or like he doesn't follow through with them.*

Ryan *What have I not followed through with?*

Anne *Everything.*

Ryan *I can't think of anything.*

Anne *I didn't get my drug order last week Ryan.*

(...)

Ryan *I think everyone should get a chance [to be in future projects]. Because obviously you guys thought that I wouldn't go through with it and it turns out I did. So everyone should get a chance.*

A secondary limitation to the findings is that the Outdoor Education group did not directly interact with other participants throughout the project nor did they attend the public exhibition; therefore although the project allowed them to be seen in a new light by peers and adults, they may not have experienced the full benefits of this changed perception themselves.

Thirdly, while most youth expressed excitement at the idea of attending the conference, the prospect also incited trepidation in some, demonstrating the pervasive devaluation of rural settings in the minds of youth:

Ben *I think that going to Toronto would kind of damage my confidence...because if you go to that art exhibition you'll see our thirty or so pictures compared to all the [Greater Toronto Area]'s amazing huge projects.*

Anne *Yeah. Our population's 3000.*

Ben *Exactly and then the amount...I don't know it just seems like ours would be very miniscule and insignificant compared to the projects there.*

Finally, while photovoice created an 'in-between' space for youth to communicate with decision makers, following the exhibition some had little faith they would truly commit to working with youth:

Warren *I think that it will die out. Because if there is any like you know action that would happen, whoever I talked to it was they would be interested in the photographs or what you were doing but they would read the description or ask you what it was about for the sole purpose about just curious about the picture itself but not the issue that you're representing so ...they don't care about the other stuff. And I could tell by the tone of their voices it's kind of a hassle to go out and do the stuff, it's like a bother.*

This points to youths' continued lack of faith that decision makers will understand or meet their needs. If decision makers do not work with youth on future projects this may serve to reinforce the idea that they lack the power to enact change.

9. Conclusion

The study described in this paper employed the photovoice methodology as a community arts project to reveal how such initiatives might act as a forum for youth to address and confront some of the disempowering challenges they face living in communities suffering socio-economic decline. In doing so it provided a novel contribution to the literature by utilizing photovoice as a community arts initiative, as well as focusing on an area which had hitherto remained untouched by academic literature.

The selection of the youth population who participated in this study, which drew from the town of Blind River and its feeder communities, were found to be facing a number of disempowering challenges within their social context. This included socio-economic structural barriers that lay beyond their ability to change, as well as a marked lack of faith in local decision makers to meet youth needs. Given the unequal distribution of capital within the community, those with reduced access to economic capital were found to be less likely to see themselves as having the social mobility to leave the community, leading to what was referred to as a 'cycle of decline'. Youth were also found to be facing harmful community narratives which led to their appropriating negative identities related to being apathetic, unwilling to engage, and destructive. Lastly, given that youth had little voice in the community due to the lack of receptive social environments, they were found to have lapsed into a state of adapted consciousness where they were unable to envision themselves as able to address the challenges confronting them.

The study found that by taking part in a community arts activity youth were able to build their own bonding social capital by working together through focus group discussions, planning a public exhibition and collectively taking part in a creative act. It enabled them to challenge dominant narratives by following through with the project against their own expectations as well as those of adults; by producing artistic and intuitive works of art; and by presenting visual narratives which communicated stories of the challenges and strengths of their community from their own perspective. The 'in-between' and metaphorical spaces created by the photovoice process also allowed youth to re-appropriate some power within the public sphere. These processes were found to have facilitated the youth's progression from adapted consciousness, through critical consciousness and to a point of collective action, thus enabling youth-empowering social change to take place in their community. This change has the potential to be sustained through the development of a receptive social environment, as youth at the time of writing have been invited to present their idea for a youth arts space to Town Council.

Although it is hoped that decision makers will continue to heed the voices of youth and work with them to create further arts projects and a potential youth art space, a serious limitation of the project is the possibility for it to have fostered a sense of hope in youth and a faith in their

capacity to bring about change, only to have these weakened by a lack of corresponding policy changes aimed at meeting the needs they have identified.

In conclusion, this research suggests that, when working in the community development context with communities facing compounding challenges, the development of creative spaces may have the potential to help groups begin to take action to address various challenges that undermine their well-being, thus empowering them to create social change from the ground up. This supports Rappaport's view of art as a resource for social change:

"If art leads to disruptions in the social order and in the stories told by dominant groups, it also has the power to heal. It can rehabilitate the role of communal imagination by fostering an understanding of differences rather than simply smoothing over them...art can be visionary, predicting what we can be as individuals and communities. Most importantly, the development of alternative narratives through art can engage and document the process of real social change."

(Thomas and Rapapport 1996, pg. 333)

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