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Experiences of Hope for Youth Workers Engaging At-Risk and Street-Involved Young People: Applications to the Field of Counselling and Psychotherapy
Rapport à l'espoir des travailleurs des services à la jeunesse intervenant auprès des jeunes à risque et de la rue : Applications dans le domaine du counseling et de la psychothérapie

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ABSTRACT

Working with at-risk youth can be rewarding, but it can sometimes become difficult to maintain hope. This study used basic interpretive inquiry to explore and understand the experience of hope for 4 youth workers at a community organization in a large Canadian city. The authors used thematic analysis to examine data from semi-structured interviews. Three categories were constructed from the data: nourishing the hopeful self, maintaining a culture of hope, and holding hopeful perspectives. Taken in tandem with extant literature on hope, a discussion of the findings reflects on provocative ideas related to the nature of hope and the self, as well as the place of hope at work. Implications for future research and practice are explored with a focus on promoting hope for helping professionals.

RÉSUMÉ

Le travail auprès de jeunes à risque peut être gratifiant, mais il devient parfois difficile de garder espoir. Cette étude, à la lumière de questions interprétatives générales, vise à explorer et à comprendre le rapport à l'espoir de quatre travailleurs des services à la jeunesse dans un organisme communautaire d'une grande ville canadienne. Les auteurs ont recouru à l'analyse thématique pour examiner les données d'entrevues semi-structurées, qui ont été regroupées en trois catégories : renforcement de l'optimisme du soi, maintien d'une culture de l'espoir et adoption de perspectives optimistes. L'analyse des résultats de l'étude, mis en parallèle avec la littérature existante sur l'espoir, soulève une réflexion sur certaines idées provocantes liées à la nature de l'espoir et au soi, de même qu'à la place de l'espoir au travail. On y explore les implications pour les études et pratiques futures, en insistant sur l'importance d'encourager une attitude optimiste pour aider les professionnels.

Youth work with at-risk or street-involved young people is a field rife with feelings of distress, burnout, and fatigue. Factors leading to burnout in youth work have been studied exhaustively (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011; Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014; Savicki, 2002) with implications for other professional

helpers. Research has shown that hope acts as a buffer against work-related fatigue and burnout (Snyder, 1994). Unfortunately, little research to date has explored experiences of hope for youth workers. The goal of this study was to learn more about youth workers' experiences of hope at work in order to build strategies to support hope in both these workers and other helping professionals working with at-risk or street-involved young people (i.e., counsellors, psychologists, and social workers).

YOUTH WORK

This study focuses specifically upon youth workers. Notably, the role of a youth worker differs significantly from that of psychologists, psychotherapists, or counsellors, who typically adopt a formalized, clinical, and therapeutic relationship with clients in order to address mental health issues, relational difficulties, and other problems. Unlike most youth workers, psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors have many years of technical academic training and are often under the purview and supervision of governing bodies which uphold specific ethical mandates and professional responsibilities. Although this article explores the experience of youth workers, the implications of this study apply to a wide array of helping professionals. Though the field of youth work and the field of psychotherapeutic practice are different, they share some common ground.

The field of youth work has diverse responsibilities, values, and practices (Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015). Youth work is defined as a "professional practice with young people based on certain core values and principles requiring the establishment of voluntary relationships with young people, links with communities and other relevant organizations, and professional supervision from experienced practitioners" (Sapin, 2013, p. 3). Core practices of youth work include (a) meeting youth regularly in a safe environment, (b) developing a meaningful, long-term, professional helping relationship with a young person while helping them to express needs, interests and struggles, (c) helping a young person have their voice heard by their community, and finally (d) maintaining significant investment and hope for the young person's well-being (Sapin, 2013). Although youth workers as professionals tend to share several values in practice, youth workers serve a wide variety of populations in different contexts. Youth work with at-risk or street-involved young people can be a particularly challenging area.

Youth workers can engage with street-involved young people who face a myriad of complex struggles including domestic abuse, familial substance abuse, criminality, or periodic homelessness (Kidd, 2003). With clients facing multiple adverse circumstances it can be difficult for these helping professionals to sustain hope for their clients (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010). There is ample literature to suggest that youth work, youth mentorship, and outreach relationships can promote positive outcomes for vulnerable young people (Ahrens et al., 2011; Lemma, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006); however, professions like youth work commonly lead to emotional and physical exhaustion, resulting in high burnout and staff turnover (Barford & Whelton,

2010). Youth work is a high-contact profession with extensive face-time, meaning that these professionals occupy a prominent role in the lives of the young people with whom they work. During times of client turmoil, youth workers must maintain a therapeutic relationship, sustain a hopeful orientation, and help their client move toward a preferred future.

Researchers and clinicians need a better understanding of how youth workers experience and understand hope. This can offer important learning for professional mental health providers and may improve the clinical effectiveness of helping. For example, some research suggests that psychotherapist hope positively correlates to client outcomes in psychotherapy (Coppock, Owen, Zagarskas, & Schmidt, 2010). Although much research on hope exists, the hope of youth workers working with at-risk and street-involved youth has been neglected.

THE CONCEPT OF HOPE

Over the last several decades, the study of hope has increased across multiple disciplines (Eliott, 2005). Hope may have many facets. A common definition of hope is "a *multidimensional* dynamic life force characterized by a *confident* yet *uncertain* expectation of achieving a future *good* which, to the hoping person, is *realistically* possible and *personally significant* [emphasis *in original]*" (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 380). Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) model asserted that hope is like a multifaceted, process-oriented composite of contextual and temporally specific thoughts, affects, actions, and interpersonal experiences. A wealth of quantitative research demonstrates that hope is associated with enhanced outcomes in almost every aspect of human life, including academics, athletics, physical and psychological functioning, as well as social relationships (Cheavens, Michael, & Snyder, 2005; Gallagher & Lopez, 2018; Rand & Cheavens, 2009).

Meta-analyses reveal that hope is an indispensable resource at work, with higher hope being associated with better work performance, job satisfaction, and employee commitment, as well as improved health and well-being (Reichard, Avey, Lopez, & Dollwet, 2013). Conversely, research demonstrates a consistent negative relationship between employee burnout/stress and hope (Reichard et al., 2013). Given the substantial evidence that hope is important in the workplace and many other contexts, understanding more about hope for youth workers promises insight into how hope can be supported for youth workers and allied professionals working with at-risk youth.

HOPE AND THE HELPING PROFESSIONS

Building relationships with vulnerable young people and holding onto hope can be meaningful, and at times extremely difficult. Losing hope can threaten a helper's therapeutic effectiveness and compromise their ability to foster hope in their clients (Koenig & Spano, 2007; Schwartz, Tiamiyu, & Dwyer, 2007). This is especially alarming since evidence suggests that client hope is an essential factor in

positive psychotherapeutic and psychiatric treatment outcomes (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010; Schrank, Stanghellini, & Slade, 2008; Wampold & Imel, 2015).

Qualitative research examining hope for psychotherapists (Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013) and reintegration counsellors working with individuals recently released from prison (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010) offers support for the claim that hope is an important factor in the experience of helping professionals. Also, considerable research has examined burnout in child and youth professionals (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011). More generally, research has explored youth workers' experiences of working with street-involved youth (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). Importantly, only one early study has explored experiences of hope for front-line service professionals helping homeless young people (Bunkers, 1999), but researchers have recently re-emphasized the importance of hope both philosophically and practically when serving marginalized or at-risk youth (te Riele, 2010). There are little to no specific qualitative studies examining the experiences of hope for youth work professionals.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences and understandings of hope for youth workers serving at-risk youth at a small organization in Western Canada. The researchers aimed to answer the research question, "How do youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and education agency experience hope?"

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is commonly used to explore the meaning that individuals construct of a particular human experience (Creswell, 2013), making it the appropriate methodology to study the experience of hope. Further, some researchers have suggested that Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) previously mentioned multifaceted model of hope provides a rationale for exploring the multiple theoretical and contextual dimensions of hope using qualitative research methods (Eliott, 2005).

Methodology: Basic Interpretive Inquiry

Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive inquiry (BII) was chosen as the methodological framework for this study because it provided a flexible and nuanced structure in seeking to understand a social phenomenon without aligning with a single qualitative research approach. BII was employed as an overarching methodological framework of the study, guiding the authors in decisions regarding the qualitative research process in general including data collection and interpretation of meanings communicated by participants. BII is the most commonly used qualitative approach in many fields including education, counselling, and social work (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) explained that BII is a generic approach to qualitative research that honours the theoretical frameworks, philosophies, and methods undergirding specific qualitative research designs in general (e.g., focusing on cultural groups and engaging in field work as with ethnographic designs) without adhering solely to all aspects of one major qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014). BII aims to understand how people make sense of their experiences and construct their world. It also aims to uncover the meaning attributed to certain experiences (Merriam, 2009). BII is commonly used by individuals who are embedded within the context in which the phenomenon is being studied (i.e., youth work). Correspondingly, a strength of this approach is that it respects the researcher as an essential part of the analytic process, and guides the researcher to be personally reflective regarding the way personal assumptions, past experiences, and interpretations can enrich data (Merriam, 2009).

BII is premised upon social constructionism and hermeneutic philosophy (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009), which is consistent with the research paradigm and theoretical perspective of the authors of the current study. Regarding its use and relevance to this particular study, BII has been utilized in several studies concerned with better understanding the experience of helping professionals generally and hope specifically (e.g., Flesaker & Larsen, 2012; Larsen & Stege, 2010; Larsen et al., 2013).

Data Collection

Consistent with methods described above, data collection for this study consisted of audiotaped, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with four participants. Three interviews occurred in the community at small cafes and one interview took place in the office of one youth worker. Each interview lasted between one and two hours, and each participant was interviewed once. The audiotapes were transcribed upon completion of the interviews. Once transcribed, the author coded the entirety of the transcripts and sent these codes to participants, who read the codes, clarified understandings, and added details via email or over the phone with the first author.

Participants and Recruitment

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB). Participants for this study were selected using purposeful homogeneous sampling (PHS) because the information was explicitly sought from youth workers serving at-risk youth as a subgroup (Creswell, 2013). PHS was used to focus the interviews and provide more specific and nuanced information specific to youth workers (Creswell, 2013). Participants were recruited from one federally-funded agency in a large Western Canadian city providing mandated services to youth considered at-risk or street-involved. For both research purposes and to become familiar with the context within which these youth workers worked, the first author volunteered weekly in the program for approximately eight months. He developed a professional rapport with the workers and became

familiar with their working context. Because the first author had a prior relationship with participants, the second author, at more arms-length, approached potential participants for recruitment to avoid any potential of perceived coercion.

The agency provided several services including formalized employment skills training, long-term outreach mentorship for vulnerable youth in the community, and school-based group programming focused upon reducing youth violence and criminality. Workers were recruited to the study based upon two main criteria, (a) a minimum of six months experience working as a youth worker, and (b) the ability to articulate their experience concerning hope, as demonstrated by a willingness to discuss their experience and fluency in the English language.

Four participants volunteered and were selected for this research. Two male workers and two female workers participated in research interviews. Experience in the field ranged from six months to more than five years. Because the youth work community is small and the ease of identifying participants is a significant risk, no further demographic information about the sample is provided. Lastly, pseudonyms for each youth worker were used to maintain anonymity.

Data Analysis

Although Merriam's (2009) approach describes what qualitative data analysis is, it does not provide detailed information or structured guidance on how data analysis is conducted. According to Crotty's (1998) oft-cited framework for conducting social research, a methodology or methodological framework informs decisions made about methods. Indeed, BII provides some guidance on data analysis, but to engage in a rigorous, step-by-step method, the authors elected to use a structured and established method that aligned with BII. As such, Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis (TA) was used for data analysis.

TA is a structured method for identifying and reporting patterns or themes within data sets. TA is flexible in the sense that it can be utilized from varying epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks. TA facilitates the organization of data into richly detailed aspects of the research topic (i.e., categories or themes; Braun & Clarke, 2012). The approach is a structured six-step data analysis method which includes (a) becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes between participants and across participants, (d) reviewing themes individually and then with an auditor, (e) creating names for themes that fit with the data, and finally (f) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the description of TA, each step provides detailed instructions on the rigorous, disciplined analysis of textual data, and aligns closely with Merriam's (2009) understanding of both the data analytic process and adherence to validation and reliability of qualitative research.

Ensuring Quality

The researchers sought to ensure trustworthiness by adhering to quality standards outlined by Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) as best practice specific to

qualitative research in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. As such, the authors engaged in several processes to ensure the rigour of this qualitative study. First, the authors articulated and outlined their philosophical framework, prior understandings, and current theorizing as the study unfolded. The authors did this through frequent meetings and maintaining a research journal.

Second, the authors situated the sample through initially becoming familiar with the work lives of participants through a volunteer relationship. These understandings were then communicated through a description of the workplace context and the role these workers occupied within this context. Third, to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the data analysis, direct quotations from participant interviews were provided to support the conceptualization of the findings.

Fourth, the first author ensured credibility by both checking data interpretations with participants and by engaging in an ongoing audit process with both the second author and a team of experts in hope research. To ensure findings were coherent, the authors engaged with data manually, allowing for organization and reorganization of the data until the relationship between the whole data set and specific parts was optimized. Indeed, the first author also maintained frequent contact with the second author and the hope research team to make sure the findings "fit" together.

Finally, to write a document that resonated with both youth workers and helping professionals generally, the authors crafted this research write-up hoping to accurately honour youth work as a dedicated, professional endeavour while recognizing that youth work can teach important lessons across the helping professions. We hope that in writing this article, the authors encourage more disciplined academic discourse between the helping professions (e.g., psychotherapy, counselling, social work, nursing, and/or youth work) as these professions can learn much from one another.

RESULTS

The categories and themes relevant to the field of counselling psychology will be explored with illustrative quotations from the interviews. Three broad categories form the substance of the findings, including (a) nourishing the hopeful self, (b) maintaining a culture of hope, and (c) holding hopeful perspectives.

Nourishing the Hopeful Self

Fostering one's hope was considered a vital professional activity by the youth workers. They described accessing hope by acting in ways that were authentic and congruent. They also engaged in self-affirming actions which nurtured them personally and thus fostered hope. This experience of hope was not necessarily a concrete, future-focused or goal-oriented process. Instead, hope was described as concerning an implicit feeling in the present associated with actions that expressed, affirmed, or nourished the self. Three themes were constructed within this category: authenticity, walking the talk, and establishing boundaries.

Authenticity. Most of the youth workers said they felt they could be themselves at work, which supported feelings of hopefulness. This included feeling free to express their unique way of being at work in an unhindered way, or being genuine and honest with their colleagues and clients. Participants felt that being real offered colleagues and youth an opportunity to be genuine in return. As Reese, a youth worker, expressed it:

> I can talk like them [the youth]; I can swear once in a while and it's not that big of a deal. I can make fun of them and stuff... humour is a huge thing for me. Both in my personal life and my professional life so yeah [...] obviously there is a time and a place for everything [but] it's nice to be me and see them be able to be themselves too.

Most of the workers explained that they wanted to communicate openly and receptively at work. When asked about her hope, Betty expressed her appreciation for being able to express herself openly:

> We all [share] too as staff and it's like we are all part of this same group and we are going to share... honestly... like "oh yeah I am feeling really tired and crappy today so … just treat me nicely"... I think it's so simple yet something that like when else… when do you [get to] do that in your life?

A final aspect of authenticity involved the workers utilizing past experiences with hope. As reported by one of the workers, Dave, previous experiences of struggling to find hope provided him with a personal hope resource that could be used at work. Dave shared:

> When you become a youth worker they don't teach you on how to have hope. You have hope before […] because somewhere along the line in your life, you need hope for those difficult situations that are happening to you as an individual person.

Walking the talk. The youth workers referred to being role models and "living" what they taught youth. Congruency between the youth workers' values and behaviour fostered hope. This congruency involved acting in alignment with personal values and being a role model for youth. For example, youth workers shared instances when they utilized an important situation to model a skill for the youth. In an instance where Betty experienced conflict with a young person, she mentioned that the conflict served as an opportunity to teach conflict management skills:

> I think that tomorrow is always a new day and... [I am]... able to show that [to youth]... "okay yes you talked about me behind my back but I am an adult I can process that and deal with it I don't take it personally"... I want to be able to fully role model and reflect back to them.

Dave also stressed the importance of acting congruently with personal hopes and values:

> And I have to understand that the days I feel like staying in bed or the days that I feel like giving up... Is that the precedent I want to set for my youth? I don't drink, I don't use drugs, I don't do anything in terms of a negative lifestyle…. When I tell a young person something... like: "hey stop drinking stop doing drugs"[...] You're never going to see me hanging out at a bar or hanging out at a nightclub or smoking a joint on the side of the street. The reason for that is: if a youth really buys into what I'm giving them... and they see something of that nature, it's just another adult that gave them false hope and broken promises.

Establishing boundaries. Youth workers described how establishing personal boundaries at work supported hope. Attempting to address, nurture, and monitor personal well-being while engaging at-risk youth was an ongoing learning experience. Some workers mentioned that setting limits on their responsibility for youth outcomes was an important aspect of maintaining hope at work. Further, a lack of boundaries was a barrier to hope while the establishment of clear boundaries protected hope. Isaac offered that the struggle to maintain boundaries was a threat to hope:

> It gets you down sometimes hearing about like how much these youth have had to deal with and then you go back to the real world and your life... That's been a tough learning curve for me I guess... learning how to not let those things come home with me... I've had some sleepless nights about it.

Betty shared her perspective on clarifying her role and setting boundaries, "I want to do so much but lots of times it's not me ... it's not my life... I am there to support and hope for the best and encourage... and be there if they fall." She continued:

> It can kind of damper hope sometimes. If somebody has got so much potential and they are moving forward and things are great and then something happens and they fall completely off and they just disappear and we maybe never see them again. It's hard... it's totally hard.... trying to see like what part I had in it … It's always a learning process and I am human too. I can't completely remove myself from the situations because I don't think I can do my job either if I could fully remove myself. [Hope] is just about finding [a] balance and making sure I am taking care of myself.

Maintaining a Culture of Hope

Workplace culture played an important role in the experience of hope as described by participants. Two themes were described as critical, (a) youth involvement and (b) supported flexibility.

Youth involvement. A hopeful culture at work was promoted by maintaining long-term and ongoing contact with youth, and encouraging the youth to return to the agency even after completion of the program. Having the youth come back to share their current life helped the workers to see beyond the daily struggles involved in their current caseloads, and bolstered their sense of hope in the

benefits of their labours. Returning youth offered the workers the opportunity to celebrate the successes the youth had experienced. It also provided more opportunities for youth to convey appreciation and deepen the relationship with their former worker. The workers experienced this process as sustaining hope in the long term. Reese shared:

> The biggest part was not just that she is doing really well. I am happy with that but it's the fact that she came back in to tell us about it and talk to us about it and sit down and she was just so excited to share that piece of her life with us... that's important, in periods of time... where I start to experience the burnout or the compassion fatigue. It's that you see all of the hard stuff and you don't get to see the success stories... At the last job that I worked in... I never.... got to see those success stories.

Reese also commented on how she experienced hope when youth returned to visit, "[Youth coming back is] just heartwarming is the only way I can really describe it because you get so stuck in the moment and the problems that are going on and it's really hard to see the wider perspective."

Hope was restored and maintained when former clients returned to the program, and encouraging the youth to return and tell their stories provided hope to the youth workers. Staff would then savour this hope at work with their current clients. It was as if hope was recycled through the program with hope-sustaining relationships benefitting both youth and staff.

Supported flexibility. Staff hope was fostered through organizational strategies reflecting openness to change, flexibility, and respect for staff perspectives. Supported flexibility at work involved the freedom to make independent decisions, act flexibly, and work creatively with youth while feeling supported to do so. Several of the youth workers shared that they had accumulated valuable expertise as youth workers and they felt this was respected and utilized in their work. Reese commented on this sense of empowerment and hope:

> Openness to change, that's a huge thing, so when something is not working. Even if it's in the government [funding] proposal we will talk about how to change it to make it better... [or] figure out how to change it for the next contract. The last place I worked... it seemed like [they had] an openness to change... but then nothing would actually change so you didn't feel as if you had... [any] power there.

Participating youth workers at this agency understood that they could modify programming to suit youth needs. This offered hope to the youth workers, perhaps because they felt supported to work with youth in their own unique way relying on their personal expertise. Most of the workers thought they could employ their own judgment in their work with youth and could do so with the support of their supervisors. Betty provided an illustrative account:

> I think that's so hopeful too, working in a place that really is ... about relationships and it takes time to build relationships. We are never rushed through any

> of that stuff. [Management is often] like "take the time do what you need to do because we're here for one reason: we are here for the youth [and] nobody else." I think it really is encouraged from the top down. I think it's so hopeful that we can take the time to do what we feel we need to do that is going to be best for the youth.

The workers felt trusted for their skills and abilities. As a result, the workers felt more able to demonstrate therapeutic creativity, behavioural flexibility, and contextual adaptability at work. When asked about how this influenced her hope, Betty explained:

> If I had to follow the exact same plan every day... and I couldn't change anything that would be horrible... we are, on the fly, changing things, on our feet all the time because we are able to [and] we want to.

Holding Hopeful Perspectives

Participants described holding certain perspectives or cognitive orientations which bolstered hope. Two of the critical perspectives or orientations that promoted hope were (a) planting seeds of change, and (b) a sense of purpose at work.

Planting seeds. The youth workers likened their work to "planting seeds of change," a metaphor which helped the workers sustain hope during difficult times. Youth workers had a flexible understanding of the change process. They viewed change from a long-term perspective considering client failures and setbacks in the context of the larger life stories and change-narratives they had come to know through their experience in the field. Understanding change as a complex and gradual process helped the participants rekindle hope during times the workers were experiencing challenges. This perspective also helped participants approach youth work with the understanding that their work may not cause immediate, substantive change in the youth's life but instead, the changes may be slow, implicit and long-term. Isaac shared, "You have to find the small victories in what you're doing. You are not going to change this person's life but you can change the way they see the world [by] just planting seeds of change." Betty similarly shared:

> Plant those little seeds that maybe they don't fully get now but... we get lots of youth that'll came back a year later and [say] "yep I totally didn't get it then but I get it now" and... they remember that kind of stuff.

The notion of planting seeds for the future helped workers maintain a hopeful orientation during times when their clients were struggling. Reese commented:

> The times that I am not [hopeful] is usually because a youth has fallen down to a point where they may not get up... so just the knowledge that change does take time and... it took them a long time to become this way and they are not going to get out [of] this way just because... someone intervenes. So [it is hopeful] to think that even just down the line. Maybe when they are my age they will look back (even if we never hear from them again) and they'll be

> grateful that they had a space to explore who they are and build some of those skills that are essential in life.

Purposeful work. Participants felt hopeful when their work was imbued with a sense of purpose. The workers felt that uncovering or constructing a personal sense of purpose at work was critical to sustaining hope. Aspects of this theme included making a difference in the lives of others, perceiving daily work activities as contributing to something larger, and/or connecting with an existential, moral, or spiritual rationale undergirding the helping role. Isaac provided:

> I guess what brings me hope is that their working with me is going to be [the] difference... I [often] think of what would have happened if he [/she] had not [received] proper support at that time... how differently things could have gone.

Isaac's comment highlights the importance of making a difference in the life of a youth. Youth workers expressed that hope was connected to the impact they could have on a young person. The youth workers also shared that hope was related to the workers' perceived ability to make a meaningful contribution to the agency through their daily work role. Dave commented, "No role is too small ... or unimportant. Everything that we do here has meaning, has purpose." Reese similarly commented on the purpose undergirding her role at work:

> You are not just an employee filling a role. Of course we all have role descriptions…but you don't feel like you are just coming [into work] to plug away as a robot and then go home…it [work] feels more purposeful I guess.

Like Reese, other participants commented on the more profound existential significance of a career in youth work. Isaac described the moral and spiritual sense of purpose he derived from his role:

> Why would you not do [youth work]? Like there's a lot of people that [might] say... What would Jesus do? If he were alive today... he would probably be a social worker... I just don't want to live in a world where people don't care about each other.

DISCUSSION

This discussion situates the research findings within the context of current hope literature within the applied health professions, specifically relying on counselling and psychotherapy literature. At the end of the discussion, recommendations are provided for both research and practice, and the limitations of the study examined.

Nourishing the Hopeful Self

The first important idea stemming from the findings is the connection between hope and the self. The workers described certain actions associated with the experience of hope at work, namely (a) expressing oneself authentically, (b) acting in congruence with personal values, and (c) setting boundaries in one's

professional life. All three of these actions mentioned above had the common impact of fortifying the self and bolstering hope. In the literature there are clear theoretical connections between hope and the self. In a comprehensive review of hope literature, Eliott (2005), a prominent hope discourse researcher, asserted:

> Hope does seem to be part of who we deem ourselves to be, with relevance to the best and the worst of what we are. And as we wish to know about ourselves, so we wish to know about hope. (p. 38)

Along with Eliott, the findings from this study suggest that hope is connected to the sense of self, who we are, and who we wish to be. Indeed, the participants in the current study described authenticity and congruence as fostering hope.

The first self-nourishing action that promoted hope for the youth workers was authenticity. Authenticity, defined as "the free and unhindered operation of one's true or core self in daily life" (Davis & Hicks, 2013, p. 1640), has been shown to be positively correlated with hope. Conversely, accepting external influence and self-alienation (i.e., a lack of self-knowledge) has been found to negatively relate to hope in undergraduate students (Ahmet & Umran, 2014). Further, Davis and Hicks (2013) found that authentic individuals had higher hope when they endorsed limited time perspectives (i.e., facing time pressure or perceiving their future possibilities as inadequate). These authors explained that when individuals self-reflect and connect with their feelings and motivations, they can more effectively engage in goal setting, especially when they perceive that time is limited (Davis & Hicks, 2013). This literature as mentioned earlier sheds light on the connection between authenticity and hope, and lends further credibility to the youth workers' understandings of authenticity as a self-nourishing and hope-sustaining action.

The theme related to congruence and "walking the talk" points to another interesting connection between self-nourishing actions and hope. Turning to the literature, there is no evidence of research investigating links between congruence and hope. However, therapist congruence is a known common factor accounting for a portion of outcomes in psychotherapy (Klein, Kolden, Michels, & Chisolm-Stockard, 2001; Kolden, Klein, Wang, & Austin, 2011), highlighting the importance of congruence to the field of helping in general. Further, some researchers have found a positive relationship between value-based-actions and personal well-being (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Both the relationship between therapist congruence and psychotherapy outcomes, as well as the connection between congruence and well-being, demonstrates that "walking the talk" may be more broadly connected to hope as these workers described.

Maintaining a Hopeful Culture

The workplace culture for participants in this study was a key facet of hope. Participants described being intricately entwined in a cultural environment that included staff and clients. While not everything about the environment was hope-inspiring, the workers explained that maintaining specific strategies and workplace ideals was important to their experience of hope; namely, youth involvement and a

sense of supported flexibility were considered key aspects of the workplace culture. Concerning context, Dufault and Martocchio (1985), seminal hope researchers in nursing, offer a conceptualization of hope that proves instructive.

According to Dufault and Martocchio (1985), hope includes "those life situations that surround, influence and are a part of persons' hope... contexts serve as the circumstances that occasion hope, the opportunity for the hoping process to be activated or as situations for testing hope" (p. 388). Considering the contextual elements of the workplace that promoted hope for the workers, hope literature across various disciplines offers further food for thought.

Being able to reconnect with former clients helped youth workers transcend daily struggles with current clients and experience joy, hope, and continued relationship with those clients who came back to share successes. Little relevant literature exists on these topics. Perhaps some of the closest identified work is that of Howell and Larsen (2015). In their review, they lay the concept of other-oriented hope alongside the experience of empathic joy. Other-oriented hope is the "future-oriented belief, desire, and mental imagining surrounding a valued outcome of another person" (Howell & Larsen, 2015, p. 2), while empathic joy is "an expression of happiness or joy that results from comprehending another person's positive emotional state or condition" (Sallquist, Eisenberg, Spinrad, Eggum, & Gaertner, 2009, p. 223). It may be that youth workers experienced both what Howell and Larsen (2015) call other-oriented hope and what Sallquist et al. (2009) term empathic joy when engaging with former clients. These processes appear to have promoted a reinforcing and sustaining culture of hope for the workers.

Further, participants described the importance of feeling that they were encouraged to practice creatively and employ their judgment in therapeutic decision-making. There are only a few connections in the literature between creativity, flexibility, and hope, especially in the context of helping professionals' work lives. Christy Simpson (2004), a Canadian bioethics researcher, illustrated that hope involves the creative and imaginative ability to envision uncertain future possibilities. For healthcare providers, imagination and creativity are indispensable in supporting the hope of patients (Simpson, 2004). Similarly, the freedom to work creatively in present circumstances and engage imaginatively with future possibility was described by youth workers as hope-sustaining. In a study focusing upon those engaging homeless youth, Bunkers (1999) similarly found that hope was experienced through a sense of "inventive endeavoring" (p. 346), or proceeding with creativeness and innovation at work.

In yet another study, Larsen et al. (2013) researched experiences of hope for psychotherapists. The authors found that when psychotherapists had some ideas about potential directions to move therapeutically, they experienced this process as hopeful. Youth workers in the current study similarly experienced hope through the understanding that they were free to proceed in a variety of different therapeutic directions. Interestingly, researchers have found that flexibility and openness on the part of the therapist to move beyond the manual and utilize different techniques in psychotherapy can lead to better outcomes (Owens &

Hilsenroth, 2014). The findings of the current study and the above studies relating to creativity and hope provide support for the idea that creativity, as encouraged in helping contexts, may not only support the hope of assisting professionals but also improve their effectiveness.

Holding Hopeful Perspectives

Youth workers in this study described that certain perspectives were important to their experience of hope. Indeed, youth work can be difficult, if not "mind-boggling" according to some researchers (Kidd et al., 2007). Given the difficult nature of this environment, the workers in the current study maintained that perceiving one's work in a hopeful way meant (a) possessing a nuanced understanding of the change process (i.e., planting seeds), and also (b) connecting to a sense of purpose. There has been considerable qualitative research noting that certain cognitive orientations or perspectives can influence hope (Flesaker & Larsen, 2012; Harris & Larsen, 2007; Herth, 1993; Larsen & Stege, 2010). Some of this research is discussed below.

The participants in this study shared that they understood change as a dynamic and complex process in which they served the role of "planting small seeds of change." Some hope researchers have identified a similar idea held by other helping professionals. For example, Flesaker and Larsen (2010) found that reintegration counsellors working with parolees understood their client's "life as a journey" (p. 62). Here, counsellors conceptualized setbacks in the context of a broader developmental understanding of the client's life, one in which the client was engaged in a lifelong process of growth and development (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010).

The perspective held by the workers in the current study, and the counsellors in Flesaker and Larsen's (2010) study, highlight the importance of maintaining a hope-sustaining time perspective. Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) temporal dimension of hope may be helpful for considering the role that certain time perspectives play with regard to hope. They and others (Herrestad & Biong, 2010) assert that sometimes maintaining hopes that are not time specific can protect hope by "expand[ing] the possible, extend[ing] opportunities for positively affecting… hope and delay[ing] the need for further reality surveillance" (p. 387). Indeed, it appears that youth workers in this study used the seed planting metaphor as a way of understanding that their current work, while sometimes not providing immediate observable therapeutic benefit, could have a positive ripple effect on the client later in life. In helping professions, outcomes are often measured and understood within a short-term therapeutic time-frame. However, it may be that this limits a helpers' understanding regarding their effectiveness and dampens hope. The positive effects of successful psychotherapy can extend well beyond the therapeutic hour or even the entire course of treatment.

Youth workers communicated their experience of hope, which was connected to a personal sense of purpose in their work. There is plenty of research, both qualitative and quantitative, linking hope to one's experience of meaning and purpose (Benzein, Saveman, & Norberg, 2000; Feldman, Balaraman, & Anderson, 2018;

Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Flesaker & Larsen, 2010; Harris & Larsen, 2007). Further, in a qualitative study of compassion fatigue with healthcare workers, Austin et al. (2013) found that healthcare workers' hope was connected to deeply held understandings of the life purpose and identity underlying healthcare work. Participants in their study identified that hope was experienced by connecting to a perceived personal "calling" to the healthcare profession. This calling may have included a sense that transcending the self and helping others was connected to a deeper existential purpose and commitment to a larger collective helping identity (Austin et al., 2013). Austin et al.'s research lends support to the idea that youth workers in this study appeared to be communicating; namely, that purpose in one's work was pivotal in sustaining hope at work.

Implications for Research

The findings in the current study highlight important areas of future research for understanding and promoting hope for helping professionals. First, future research should explore the extent to which behaviours that affirm (authenticity and congruence) and care for (setting boundaries) the self can influence hope. Second, more literature is needed to explore helping professionals' experiences of their workplace cultures and the circumstances, beliefs, or attitudes that affirm or protect worker hope. This could provide a wide array of helping fields with valuable information about hope sustaining training, practice, and employment environments. Thirdly, the findings of this study highlight the need for further quantitative and qualitative research to explore how helping professionals think about the change process. The current authors and others (Howell, 2017) highlight the need to better understand helpers' implicit theories of change and, in effect, how these influence hope. This is important because professionals' implicit perspectives of the change process may impact clinicians own hope in-session, as well as their behaviours and helpfulness with clients (Howell, 2017).

Implications for Counselling Practice

Participants in this study provided rich accounts of hope at work, and the findings can provide meaningful learning to helping professionals. The findings are an invitation for helpers to be mindful of their hope and experiment with ways to cultivate hope at work.

Professional helpers are invited to explore the extent to which they feel free to be authentic and congruent in their helping practice. This study and other literature support the idea that authenticity and congruency can be hope-promoting ways of being at work. Specifically, helpers could reflect on the degree to which their behaviour within their practice is consistent and congruent with their sense of self even beyond the therapeutic encounter.

Next, current literature and the findings of this study support the idea that it would be worthwhile for helpers to explore and understand their perspectives regarding the change process, and how these perspectives influence hope in their helping work. In working with at-risk populations, it can be especially difficult

to sustain hope. Maintaining perspectives and beliefs that set expectations for therapeutic progress within a reasonable context and which are supportive of helper hope is of critical importance when working with client's facing multiple barriers. Helpers are lastly invited to explore the sense of purpose they derive from their helping role. People become helping professionals for a variety of reasons; the meaning one derives from a helping role may sustain hope in the midst of difficult working environments and helping circumstances.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights and understandings for professionals and researchers. Given the small and specific sample of youth workers interviewed, it is important for readers to carefully consider how the study's findings can be transferred from the specific work setting described herein to other youth work settings.

Due to confidentiality concerns, limited demographic information was provided in this report so that participant anonymity could be protected. In future studies a larger sample size, drawn from several youth work agencies, may permit transferability of findings.

Conclusion

This study explored hope for youth workers. Learning about hope for youth workers and considering current literature may provide important strategies and knowledge to professional helpers who engage at-risk and street-involved youth. Youth workers are professionals faced with a difficult daily work life, and we hope that these findings can promote future research initiatives, clinical training, and continued conversation aimed at supporting hope in professional helpers, especially those tasked with assisting at-risk young people and others facing multiple, complex barriers in their lives.

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