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EDITORIAL: In a World of 'Us' and 'Them': The Case Against Intervention-Focused Research

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EDITORIAL: In a World of 'Us' and 'Them': The Case Against Intervention-Focused Research

If the recent global demographic movements, including refugee movements from Syria and North Africa to Europe, 'illegal immigrants' from Central America to the United States, and fleeing Rohingya Muslims from Burma to Bangladesh, have taught us anything, we are still very much entrenched in 'us' and 'them' narratives. In fact, these demographic movements have brought to the fore what was probably already there; a deep mistrust of 'them', filtered through racism, hate-speech, and damage-based understandings of the other. This is *our* country, *our* community, *our* neighbourhood, and *they* better acknowledge that, by behaving our way, following our traditions, and becoming *Us* (pending our decision that these efforts have been sufficient). It is an ugly narrative, one that has often given rise to violence. Both historically and now, political leadership has, in many cases, actively contributed to the mayhem; certainly the contemporary narrative feeds off well-embedded resentments and ideological positions in civil society. The much-taunted grassroots, who were associated with progressive and forward-looking ideas not so long ago, turn out to also exist as reactionary, small-minded and often racist social groups.

We have written on this phenomenon in previous editorials; our intention here is to consider its manifestation in research on children and youth, and most specifically on intervention research in child and youth services. In spite of the best intentions, a great deal of this research is damage-focused; it sets out to articulate the problems of specific groups of young people, families or communities and to evaluate the professional interventions designed to mitigate such problems. In the process, we are building a body of knowledge, and therefore constructing a narrative, about these groups as damaged. This observation has been made particularly eloquently by Eve Tuck (2009), who, positioned as an Indigenous person in the North-Eastern United States, wrote about damaged-centered research nearly 10 years ago in the *Harvard Educational Review*. Tuck asked us to "consider the long term implications of thinking of ourselves as broken" (p.409). In her powerful letter to the research community she pointed out that research that documents damage and then highlights interventions constitutes yet another form of surveillance; in the context of young people, such research asks the question 'what are they up to and how can we fix them'. Tuck's argument is more than a call for strength-based perspectives to

be integrated into research; it is a call for ensuring that we don't inadvertently construct damaged 'others', a narrative that turns out to be very difficult to escape.

These days, we are finding quite a lot of research is unfolding with respect to young people focused on specific, often one-dimensional, identity markers; there are research findings with respect to Trans youth, racialized youth, Queer youth, street-involved youth, gang-involved youth and so on. And very often, such research seeks to highlight the damaged context of life that unfolds within these groups of young people. At the very least, research tends to start from this deficit orientation; queer young people are labeled as uniformly "at risk" and then research moves forward to investigate how to mitigate this risk. We explore interventions, almost always designed and carried out by the experts, the professionals, in the context of institutional and community-based services that are very much part of larger service systems and that are reflective of local, sometimes national, service structures.

It is not that such research is ill-intended or lacks value. But it does have the effect of 'othering' those subject to the interventions and of uniting those carrying out the intervention. In fact, the focus on inter-disciplinary and inter-professional practices further cements the Us and Them context of this research. We become aligned across disciplines and professional practice orientations as one group of people (Us), while those subject to our interventions, and the research assessing those interventions, become Them, the ones with the problem that we will fix.

What are the long term implications of this dynamic? For one thing, it constructs the lived world of self-formed communities, such as Trans communities, Queer communities, or racialized communities, as fundamentally damaged; whatever lived experience is to be had within those communities suffers from inappropriate norms, lamentable outcomes, and everyday dysfunction. Very seldom are these communities' strengths and acts of resistance or resilience centered in how the population gets framed. Intervention-based research is blind to the daily life of young people within their self-formed communities; it cannot see the dynamics of mutual support, of loyalty, of love, and of empowerment embedded within these communities. Most of the time, it does not even query these dynamics, preferring instead to identify solutions to problems constructed by the research itself.

We have learned about the disconnect between our need to identify damage (and risk, vulnerability and victimhood) and the desires and preferences of the others, in this case young people, in the context of child labour discussions. While much of the research community (and also the NGO community) focused on successful interventions to eliminate child labour, children and youth themselves found purpose, meaning and utility in their work (not to mention the material value this work contributes to these children's families and communities). Far from wanting to be saved by the norms of white people with good intentions, they began to identify their desire to keep working, ideally under better conditions and more clearly geared to their developmental and life circumstances.

These dynamics are not limited to the issue of child labour. Historically, we can identify a long series of issues and themes that we engaged with a view to intervene to contain the damage. From conversion therapy in the context of gay and lesbian young people to the longstanding diagnosis of 'gender identity disorder', we expended enormous research resources and intellectual energy trying to intervene and mitigate the damage associated with sexual diversity and gender fluidity. In Canada, the United States and Australia, enormous efforts went into 'civilizing' Indigenous peoples, based on damage narratives pursuant to Indigenous communities. One sometimes gets the sense that such narratives are still present, at best simmering under the surface of politically more correct language. For many years we have invested in researching abstinence-based interventions into youth drug addiction in spite of a strong but usually less researched and less funded harm reduction community that offers alternatives. And we only have to look to our current approaches to intervening in autism through IBI and ABA measures that bear a very strong resemblance to pet training programs to see how we continue to look for damage in order to rationalize our research on interventions that might mitigate this damage. Across all these examples, what emerges is a picture of the Other characterized exclusively by deficit, which not only limits the range of options for identity and self-expression available to that Othered young person, it also justifies correction and intervention – and in so doing, reinscribes all-too-familiar power relationships between the diagnosed and the diagnoser.

The historical record in the human services demonstrates clearly how research focused on interventions presupposes this damage narrative in which we can identify Us as experts and Them as victims. Our research does exactly what the responses to global migration reflect about broader society – it divides civil society into Us and Them, into those who function within a normative structure of white supremacy and those who must be made to function in that structure or else be discarded.

Perhaps we are expressing this problem in terms that are a little too stark. Researching interventions seems intuitively meaningful as it helps us build an evidence-based of what works and what does not. This should assist us in the efficacious allocation of scarce resources, and it should, over time, lead to better outcomes for young people facing adversity of some kind. But we cannot deny that the implications of constructing the young people (Them) as damaged and in need of (our) interventions are worrisome, and very likely overlook a great deal of social relations unfolding within youth communities that hold enormous promise for healing, growth and alternative social forms that may be more democratic and inclusive than what our interventions can produce. Further, we cannot simply accept the markers of effectiveness ("what works") without investigating what it means for the intervention to be effective; does it mean simply that the deviant other is now less deviant? That the sufferer now has new tools to manage their suffering? Or is effectiveness indicated by the alleviation of the conditions that led to

the damaged label in the first place? Put differently: upon what (rather than whom) are we intervening?

At the very least, we can say with confidence that Queer Youth are not victims of queerness; they face exclusion, judgment, and a firm designation as other; autistic young people (or young people impacted by autism) are not victims of autism; they struggle to use their neuro-diversity in institutional and social structures and processes that demand neuro-typical ways of being. While it often seems a little naïve, and perhaps even unethical, to think that self-formed communities of young people should not have to adapt to Us, and that they are Us already, it seems equally unjust and perhaps a little destructive to simply categorize them as 'other until fixed'. It also seems that this provides a convenient excuse for institutions such as schools, custody facilities, treatment centres and courts to segregate young people who can be classified as other; to expose them to levels of surveillance that would be considered unconstitutional for Us, and to allow a narrative to form that simply eliminates their desires, their accomplishments, and the democratic and civil social relations embedded in their communities.

All of this may seem extreme; surely our intervention-focused research simply aims to ensure that we are doing well by these young people. Then again, we no longer live in a world where an explicit articulation of Us and Them is deemed problematic. We have learned that quite a number among Us are willing to go to great lengths to keep Us on one side of the wall, and Them on the other. This could happen to children and youth in our human services too. As we conduct research into interventions, their effectiveness, their efficiency and their outcomes, we would be wise to consider the extent to which our work is cementing young people's identities and communities as damaged. This hasn't served the millions of people caught up in contemporary migrations well; it probably won't serve children and youth well either.

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September 2018

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