

Experiences of Hope for Youth Workers Engaging At-Risk Youth

by

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## **Abstract**

Youth workers are helping professionals who build relationships with vulnerable youth, youth who face a myriad of complex struggles. Working with clients facing consistently stressful life circumstances, it can be difficult for these helping professionals to sustain hope in their work. The relationship between outreach-related relationships and positive youth outcomes are firmly established in the literature. Youth work is characteristically challenging because workers are faced with clients who may be resistant to change or engage in risky behaviors. Research shows that hope is an important factor for professionals when facing difficult circumstances and challenging clientele. In addition, helping professionals who are hopeful for their clients tend to foster better treatment outcomes. This research study employed Merriam's Basic Interpretive Inquiry to explore the experience of hope for four youth workers from a community organization in a large Canadian city. Employing thematic analysis to examine data from semi-structured interviews with the participants, results of this study centered upon five themes. Youth workers communicated that hope was experienced through the workers': (1) sense of self, (2) work atmosphere, (3) perspectives, and (4) relationships. The youth workers also discussed a fifth experience that threatened their experiences of hope at work, namely socio-cultural barriers. The results of this study are discussed in the context of contemporary hope research. Specific implications for the fields of youth work and counselling psychology are discussed.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Kenneth Charles Murdoch. This research project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name:

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Helping professionals can work in several contexts including social work, counselling, or healthcare. Through building relationships with clients, helpers have the opportunity to participate with people during times of progress and success and also at times of stagnation and hopelessness. The latter experience is a key aspect of the professions that can make the work challenging and emotionally taxing. One helping profession, youth work, reflects these realities. Youth work with at-risk young people can test the mettle of the most seasoned helping professionals; it can also offer an inspiring look into the strengths of youth facing pervasive life difficulties. Hope has been shown to be an essential factor in psychotherapy for both counsellors and clients (Irving et al., 2004; Larsen & Stege, 2012; Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013). Being a youth worker and facing the many difficult circumstances and challenges associated with this line of work may have an impact on one's hope. An in-depth look at the experience of hope from the perspectives of youth workers can offer a novel, unique understanding of this challenging and understudied profession. Through interviewing youth workers engaging at-risk youth, I aimed to better understand hope from the perspective of youth workers engaging at-risk youth in an inner-city employment and educational outreach agency. The following chapter offers a statement of the problem, the relevance of this problem to the field of counselling psychology, a brief introduction to the literature, a purpose statement, the research questions, and an exploration of qualitative methodology and how this methodology influences the way this document is presented.



## Definition of Terms

Throughout the document, I employ academic terminology as well as terminology specific to the field of youth work. I employ terms such as *youth work* or *at-risk youth*. The terms youth work and at-risk youth are inconsistently used in the literature and will therefore be fully defined in the literature review chapter. However, brief descriptions are found below.

The terms ‘organization’ or ‘agency’ are used interchangeably in this document and refer to the inner city, employment, and educational outreach agency employing my research participants. This agency engages at-risk youth through mandated outreach and educational programming funded by the federal government. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, the name of the organization will not be provided.

The terms ‘at-risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ will be used interchangeably throughout this document to refer to young people facing circumstances that put them at risk of negative life outcomes. The use of the term ‘at-risk’ is intended to represent several steps on a continuum. This continuum reflects risk factors associated with being in a time of developmental transition (adolescence) and experiencing individual and social factors that negatively affect one’s life trajectory. At-risk circumstances can include a wide array of factors such as criminality, homelessness, drug-use, familial abuse, or mental illness (Ellis et al., 2012; Kidd, 2003; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007).

The term *youth worker* will be employed to refer to a helping professional whose duties generally involve establishing relationships with youth in the community, empowering youth, connecting them to community resources, promoting youth safety and welfare, and advocating for youth-related social causes (Sapin, 2013; Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015).

A final issue related to terminology involves the first person voice employed in this document. This research adheres to an interpretive qualitative methodology. In qualitative research, the voice of the researcher is made explicit such that the reader can interpret results with contextual information. Throughout the manuscript, the term “I” refers to myself as the principle investigator. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, which makes the first person voice appropriate for this study (Merriam, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Youth workers and outreach workers engage with youth who can face a myriad of complex struggles. With clientele facing stressful life circumstances, it can be difficult for helping professionals to stay therapeutically engaged and hopeful for their clients (Flesaker & Larsen, 2012); this is especially relevant for youth workers. The benefits of outreach-related relationships to vulnerable youth have been firmly established in the literature (Ahrens et al., 2011; Lemma, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006), but this work can be challenging when workers are faced with clients who are resistant to change or engage in maladaptive behavior.

Engaging with vulnerable youth and harboring hope for their well-being and pro-social development is an important yet difficult process for youth workers. The challenges associated with engaging at-risk youth can make it difficult for these professionals to develop or sustain hope (Koenig & Spano, 2007). When a helping professional’s hope is challenged, this poses a threat to the worker’s therapeutic effectiveness and ability to foster hope with the client he or she is engaging (Schwartz, Tiarniyu, & Dwyer, 2007). Hope is understood to be a common factor in the change process (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010) and a precursor to change in therapeutic work with challenging clients (Hanna, 2002), making research into the applications

of hope in youth work appropriate and timely. Hope researchers in the field of counselling psychology have explored psychologists' in-session experiences of hope to better understand how professionals experience and understand hope in the context of therapy (Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013). In youth work, where professionals face a variety of threats including burnout and vocational disengagement, an in-depth understanding of hope in their working contexts is warranted. Indeed, prominent researchers in the field of hope research have associated burnout with an absence of hope and, conversely, hope as a protective factor against burnout (Snyder, 1994). Understanding the experiences of hope for youth workers can lead to a nuanced understanding of important aspects of the profession, including how to develop strategies that bolster the effectiveness of youth work while responding to concerns about youth worker burnout.

Past studies have focused on experiences of hope for various helping professions such as psychotherapy (Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013), social work (Koenig & Spano, 2007), or reintegration counselling (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010). Experiences of hope for youth workers, however, have not been explored. Previous research on youth workers has examined the negative and challenging experiences of this profession that lead to burnout (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011). Researchers have also generally explored youth worker experiences of providing care to street involved youth (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). However, there has been no formal qualitative research exploring positive elements of youth work.

I approach this research problem with both a personal and academic motivation. My personal experiences in this field will be introduced briefly below. I have approximately six years of experience working with youth at-risk. I worked for two years in the field of child and youth care. This work experience included caring for youth separated from their families. I then

engaged in multiple practicum opportunities supporting and providing outreach to at-risk youth in the community. Following these experiences, I transitioned into working with youth struggling with addictions and mental health issues and have been employed in this area for three years. While my experience with at-risk youth has been short, it has offered rich learning experiences and sensitized me to the complexities of the field. I have worked with youth facing multiple barriers including but not limited to: addictions, homelessness, criminality, familial abuse, mental health issues, organic brain damage, cognitive disabilities, and marginalization as a cultural minority. Given my own experiences of challenges faced when working with at-risk youth, I have a personal inclination to answer important questions in this field so that I can support those engaged in this profession. I also hope that this research will serve to bolster what we know about applied psychology in general and counselling psychology more specifically. Below I will explore the relevance of my topic to the field of counselling psychology.

### **Relevance to Counselling Psychology**

In a special issue of *Canadian Psychology*, authors attempted to develop the profession of counselling psychology by exploring the scope, identity, definition, and current research directions in the profession. By exploring the history of the discipline in the Canadian context and situating current counselling psychology research within the larger framework of applied psychology, this issue demarcated the bounds of the profession in Canada. It also provided guidance on areas of future research as well as professional practice-related issues (e.g., training and supervision) (Sinacore, 2011). Within this special issue of the journal, several realms of research were identified as areas of particular strength in Canadian counselling psychology research. Within the sphere of wellness and positive psychology research, authors highlighted that Canadian researchers focusing upon the concept of hope represented a strong aspect of

Canadian counselling psychology (Bedi et al., 2011; Hiebert, Domene, & Buchanan 2011; Sinacore et al., 2011). My research is situated within positive psychology and wellness promotion in the context of the workplace. My focus is upon hope as experienced by youth workers employed to support Canadian youth. My research is relevant and important to the field because it may provide insight into the factors that support hope in other helping professionals such as counselling psychologists. Developing practical strategies to support hope in counselling psychologists and other helping professionals may increase the degree to which these professionals can be helpful to their clients and/or patients.

### **Researcher Statement**

My assumptions about hope as well as my youth work experience are influential to my research. I believe that hope is an essential element in youth work. Hope and hopelessness are intimately wound into the work-life of most youth workers. The opportunity to stand by young individuals on their journeys as they struggle or succeed is a deeply humanizing experience. Youth workers inevitably make contact with their own personal experiences of hope and hopelessness as they join with the young person in his or her desperate struggle. My experiences with at-risk youth have inspired me and have led me to despair. I have witnessed stories of resilience and strength, as well as stories of immense struggle. I am acutely aware of the strength of character that is demanded of professionals in this field. Experiencing the ebbs and flows of working with at-risk adolescents can be taxing and breeds feelings of hopelessness.

In my experience, I have noticed that some youth workers can stay hopeful in the face of what seems like disaster. These workers are able to navigate tumultuous times with young people and build meaningful relationships throughout. While some youth workers are able to do this, others are left exhausted by the many challenges of the field. Constant staff turnover has become

a common issue in youth work organizations and continues to pose a significant threat to the effectiveness of service delivery for many agencies. With my personal experience in the field, I am left with several questions as a researcher: what sustains youth workers' hope, and how do youth workers experience hope while at work?

In order to better understand the answers to these questions, it is necessary to undertake an exploratory analysis of youth worker experiences of hope. Acquiring a nuanced understanding of youth worker hope is likely to aid organizations in understanding the importance and role of hope for their employees. This research may also assist organizations to purposefully and practically support youth workers' feelings of hope. This research is likely to have applications beyond the field of youth work. There are potential implications for the profession of counselling psychology. As counselling psychologists, we have an opportunity to learn from para-professionals such as youth workers. The experience of working with difficult clients is a ubiquitous phenomenon among the helping professions. A detailed examination of hope for youth workers can provide counselling psychologists with an understanding of how other professionals maintain and nurture hope at work while working with difficult clients.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My goal through this research was to understand experiences of hope for youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and educational outreach agency. I sought to shed light onto the experience of hope for youth workers. I also hoped to uncover the barriers that these workers face with respect to hope. There has been no prior exploration of hope from the perspectives of youth workers, and I intended to open up academic discourse about how to support the hope of those working in this profession. I agree with Kidd and colleagues (2007) that the perspectives of youth workers must be shared in academic research so that: (a) better

communication is fostered between academia and frontline fields such as youth work, (b) the clinical and practical implications of this research can be considered by professionals in other fields, and (c) the perspectives of these workers, who dedicate massive amounts of time and energy to a profession rife with challenges, are validated and understood. Lastly, youth workers are a wise and interpersonally skilled group of helping professionals. They draw heavily on helping skills used in other professions. Perhaps a better understanding of the youth work profession can lead to helpful insights for other helping professions, as these workers specialize in working with challenging clientele to some extent.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study sought to answer one main research question and three related sub-questions. First and overall:

How do youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and education agency experience hope?

In follow up:

What are some barriers that youth workers face with regard to their hope?

What personal experiences foster hope at work?

What contextual/environmental factors are related to hope for these workers?

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

To gain an in-depth understanding of hope from the perspectives of youth workers, I employed a qualitative methodology. This study was exploratory and thus suited to qualitative exploration. Using Merriam's Basic Interpretive Inquiry (1998), I aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of hope in the youth work profession. The practice of qualitative research is predicated on certain principles and assumptions, which will be elaborated upon in

Chapter 3. Most important among these assumptions is that the researcher plays a key role in the construction of findings. I, as the principal investigator, have a certain influence on the construction of findings in this study. In providing a qualitative account, it is important for the reader to have some familiarity with the researcher. Within this chapter, I have attempted to offer the reader the opportunity to understand me as a person in relation to this project. I elaborate on my position as a researcher and my research relevant background in Chapter 3. Finally, throughout the document, I attempt to state openly my convictions, opinions, understandings, and perspectives of hope. I aim for transparency and honesty about my assumptions and provide information on how they enriched my findings in hopes that the reader can interpret the results from an informed perspective.

The following work consists of four additional chapters. The following chapters include: (1) literature review, (2) methodology, (3) results, and (4) discussion.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to my study. The chapter provides information regarding (1) at-risk youth, (2) the profession of youth work, (3) the challenges of engaging at-risk youth, (4) major theoretical perspectives on hope, and (5) literature specific to the place of hope in the helping professions. By presenting current research, I hope to inform the reader about background information relevant to the experiences of youth workers and their accounts of hope. In addition, I also briefly critique the literature with the various strengths and areas for growth.

### At-Risk or Vulnerable Youth

Adolescence is a time of immense psychosocial, emotional, and cognitive change (Schmid et al., 2011). Adolescents can face many arduous circumstances and psychosocial stressors, which can impede positive life outcomes. The term *at-risk* is commonly employed to describe adolescents facing stressful life circumstances including domestic abuse, familial substance abuse, criminality, homelessness, or substance abuse (Kidd, 2003), many of which are associated with maladaptive adult outcomes (Ellis et al., 2012). Others have defined ‘at-risk’ as: “a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes... [This term] must be viewed less as a discrete, unitary diagnostic category than as a series of steps along a continuum” (McWhirter et al., 2007, p. 6). The definition proposed by McWhirter and colleagues draws attention to the way this term is sometimes used as a negative, all encompassing label rather than as a developmental term associated with certain lifestyle factors. I will use the terms *at-risk* or *vulnerable* interchangeably throughout this manuscript to challenge any potentially pejorative and seemingly all-inclusive label.

The literature is replete with the challenges faced by at-risk youth. Kidd and colleagues (2007) summarized the extensive literature base that has surfaced in the past 20 years presenting the backgrounds of abuse and victimization for at-risk youth, as well as higher incidences of homelessness, suicidality, mortality, and poor mental and physical health. The authors draw attention to the insufficient literature surrounding service provision for vulnerable youth when the need to address treatment issues with this population remains high (Kidd et al., 2007).

### **The Scope of Youth Work**

Youth work is a career with diverse – and highly contextual – responsibilities, values, and practices (Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015). Some authors have defined youth work as “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). The core principles or guideposts of youth work vary, but a few common elements are woven through the professional literature. Generally, youth workers respectfully meet youth in contexts in which the youth feel familiar (Sapin, 2013, p. 3) and build positive, voluntary, and anti-oppressive relationships with young people to discuss their needs and interests. Youth workers aim to engage in caring and honest dialogue with young people to facilitate expression of the youth’s identity, needs, and situation (Sapin, 2013). Another common element in the professional practice of youth work is a hope to provide a voice to the unheard; social justice and advocacy stand out among the chief values underlying youth work. Lastly, youth work holds significant investment in the safety and welfare of young people (Wood et al., 2015).

The skills and expertise required of youth workers are largely contextual and based on the needs of the particular young people or the communities in which they reside (Shockley & Thompson, 2012). In general, young people tend to “value youth workers firstly because they are trusted adults” (Wood et al., 2015, p. 6). Youth workers straddle a sometimes-difficult role between that of a trusted peer or friend and a helpful, professional role model. A youth worker must be respected and trusted by the youth with whom they work while simultaneously setting firm and clear boundaries as a professional with investment in their well-being (Wood et al., 2015). In this way, the profession demands acute self-awareness, a commitment to continuous learning, and well-developed ethical awareness (Wood et al., 2015).

The working environment varies for youth workers. All youth workers are primarily involved with the support of young people in a holistic and multifaceted way (Wood et al., 2015). Some serve in an educational or professional helping role while others occupy more informal positions involving unstructured mentorship and guidance. From my experience of youth work in Alberta, organizations providing services to vulnerable or street-involved young people is primarily focused on building formal and supportive helping relationships. Youth workers in Alberta are typically employed in group program contexts or in one-on-one outreach contexts.

It is evident that youth workers are employed in a variety of contexts and roles. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on those youth workers equipped with the task of building formal helping relationships with street-involved, at-risk, or otherwise-vulnerable youth in a group and one-on-one context.

### **Working with Vulnerable Youth**

The difficulties and demands for those engaging with youth living vulnerable or risky

lifestyles have been well documented (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011; Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014; Savicki, 2002). As a former youth worker, I experienced the challenges to hope posed by this work. Front-line human service professionals engaging with at-risk youth are presented with a situation that most helpers might be familiar with: trying to “find a way of sustaining a hopeful orientation in the presence of those who don’t comply with treatment, don’t get well, won’t take advice and don’t convey a sense of appreciation” (Jevne & Nekolaichuk, 2003, p. 197). All the while, youth workers are faced with a work environment rife with feelings of being overwhelmed, underpaid, and often burned out (Shockely & Thompson, 2012). Lakind and colleagues (2014) found that youth mentors described their work as emotionally taxing, especially when making a full-time investment in long-term, close relationships with young people living at-risk lifestyles.

While the challenges of engaging vulnerable young people are well documented, it is also important to be mindful of the crucial role that youth workers play in positive outcomes of youth (Shockley & Thompson, 2012). There is extensive literature demonstrating the importance of positive, long-term relationships and the comprehensive benefits these relationships foster for at-risk youth (Ahrens et al., 2011; Lemma, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). In a meta-analysis of 73 independent evaluations of mentorship programming, Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, and Valentine (2011) proposed that mentoring relationships with at-risk youth promote “several intertwined developmental and interpersonal processes that, in turn, help young people to both avoid problems and reach their full potential” (p. 66). Research has shown when youth access mentorship or outreach support, it may foster improvements in socio-emotional, cognitive, and identity development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang & Noam, 2006). In short, there is literature to support the notion that long term caring relationships with youth can

promote positive youth outcomes in diverse settings (Conolly & Joly, 2012).

There are clear positive associations between supportive relationships with youth workers and outcomes for at-risk or vulnerable youth. However, youth workers themselves are often without voices that can affect meaningful change in the field. Their perspectives are often not included in academic discourse, and recommendations offered by clinical research are uninformed by the rich experiences of youth workers (Kidd et al., 2007). An exploration of hope from the perspectives of youth workers can provide voice to youth workers and has the potential to affect change in the field through novel approaches to engaging staff in their work. So far, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of therapeutic factors such as hope for at-risk youth and their workers. Since hope has been theorized as a crucial resource for at-risk or marginalized youth (te Riele, 2010) and therapist hope has been linked to positive client outcomes (Coppock, Owen, Zagarskas, & Schmidt, 2010), the exploration of youth worker experiences of hope is an important facet of this therapeutic dynamic. To engage meaningfully in a hope-focused study, it is important to survey the relevant literature. The next section will focus on exploring current theories related to hope across several disciplines.

### **What is Hope?**

The last 30 years have seen a significant increase in interdisciplinary studies regarding the concept of hope (Elliot, 2005). There are multiple conceptualizations of hope used across various disciplines. The major conceptual models of hope can be divided into two categories: uni-dimensional models (Snyder, 1995) and multi-dimensional models (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985; Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995; Stephensen, 1991). I will explore some of the major uni-dimensional and multidimensional theorizations of hope in terms of their relevance to my study.

**Snyder.** Snyder and colleagues (1995) developed and popularized a uni-dimensional model of hope in psychology. This approach to understanding hope has a cognitive-behavioral focus. The model places goals at the center of what it means to hope. For Snyder (1995), hope is a goal-focused process that centers upon our motivation to achieve goals (agency) and the degree to which we adequately plan to meet goals (pathways). According to Snyder's (1995) model, hope is a composite of successful pathway- and agency-oriented thought processes that lead people toward the achievement of meaningful goals. Though Snyder (2002) stated that emotions play a role in the hoping process, they primarily serve the purpose of informing our cognitions, which are the root of hope. Snyder (2002) also comments on the importance of the union of pathway and "agentic" thought. Though each of these processes are necessary to hope, neither one of them are sufficient in hopeful thinking. According to this theory, an individual would need to have a combination of agency- and pathway-oriented thoughts to be high in hope (Snyder, 1995). From this theory, Snyder has developed multiple scales to measure his concept of hope. These scales have been used in empirical research, have strong psychometric properties, and have shown significant positive associations with a myriad of positive outcomes such as psychological adjustment, athletic performance, academic performance, and psychotherapy outcomes (see Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Snyder, 2002).

Snyder's writing on hope provides one foundation for quantitative exploration of hope and firmly established the relevance of hope to psychology (see Snyder, 2002). In large measure due to his work, we understand that hope is an important aspect of goal-directed behavior and correlates strongly and positively with most aspects of human functioning (Elliot, 2005). Indeed, quantitative hope research that began with Snyder's work has been so extensive it has led researchers reviewing his work to conclude, "higher hope virtually always is related to more

beneficial life outcomes” (Elliott, 2005, p. #). Hope as measured by Snyder and colleagues has been shown to correspond with increased academic and athletic performance, physical and psychological well-being, and enriched interpersonal relationships (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). While acknowledging that Snyder’s model defines the first movement in the empirical examination of hope, I will consider it a complement to the more dynamic and multifaceted conceptualizations that I expect will be more relevant to this work.

**Dufault and Martocchio.** To examine other theories of hope, one must venture out of the discipline of psychology and into that of nursing. In an early qualitative study examining the experiences of hope with older adult cancer patients, Dufault and Martocchio (1985) define hope as “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*” [italics in original] (p. 380). According to these authors, hope is as a multidimensional, process-oriented concept rather than a one-dimensional construct. The authors assert that hope is best conceptualized as a conglomeration of many context specific thoughts, affects, actions, interpersonal experiences, and behaviors that change with time (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985).

The authors describe hope in terms of two spheres: generalized and particularized. Generalized hope is broad and associated with an overall hopeful orientation toward the future. Generalized hope is “a sense of some future beneficial but indeterminate developments” (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 380). It is best described as “an overall motivation to carry on with life’s responsibilities” (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p.380) and can be related to a person’s openness and flexibility toward life events. Particularized hope is described as the specific side of hope that “encourages investment in and commitment to something specific that extends beyond the

present moment” (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 380).

Each of these two spheres is conceptualized as comprised of six dimensions that structure an individual’s experience of hope. These dimensions are affective, cognitive, behavioral, affiliative, temporal, and contextual. The first dimension is affective, described as the emotions and sensations associated with hoping and the ways in which hoping can be enmeshed with our passion (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985). The next dimension, cognitive, is described as the way we base our hopes in reality by planning ways to realize them. Arguably, this aspect is most similar to Snyder’s cognitive model of hope. Third is the behavioral dimension, which relates to the way an individual might take action toward hope. Fourth, a dimension commonly described across theoretical approaches of hope is the affiliative dimension (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985). This dimension relates to hope in terms of the person’s experience of being in relationships with others. The next dimension, temporal, describes an individual’s experience of the present, past, and future, which affects his or her hope. Lastly, the contextual dimension serves to situate hope in the life of the hoping person. Dufault and Martocchio (1985) describe the contextual dimension of hope as “the circumstances that occasion hope, the opportunity for the hoping process to be activated, or as a situation for testing hope” (p. 389).

Dufault and Martocchio’s (1985) research on hope is relevant to my work, as it is multifaceted and contextual and my theoretical perspective, as will be described, is interpretive and social constructionist. Through conducting qualitative research with a social constructionist orientation, I seek to honor the contextual embeddedness of hope in the lives of youth workers. Dufault and Martocchio’s theory of hope aligns well with my qualitative, social constructionist methods. In fact, Elliot (2005) asserted that Dufault and Martocchio’s (1985) examination of hope, with its nuanced conceptualization, laid the groundwork for virtually all qualitative



research on hope thereafter. I agree and posit that hope needs to be understood contextually. Exploring hope with the understanding that it may be a multi-dimensional, dynamic, and contextual phenomenon opens the researcher to interpret nuanced understandings of the concept. As such, Dufault and Martocchio's research on hope is essential to my study. Understanding hope in a multi-faceted sense provides a foundation of openness and respect for the complex experiences of hope that youth workers may have in their work.

**Farran, Herth, and Popovich.** In their comprehensive literature review on hope, Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995) developed another influential multidimensional model of hope in the context of healthcare. These authors defined hope as “essential to the experience of the human condition... [hope]... functions as a way of feeling, a way of thinking, a way of behaving, and a way of relating to oneself and one's world” (Farran et al., 1995, p. 6). This definition highlights the multidimensional nature of hope. According to Farran and colleagues (1995), hope has four attributes: (a) an experiential process, (b) a spiritual process, (c) a thought process, and (d) a relational process. Further, the authors added that hope could be present whether or not there is an outcome or object that one is hoping for (Farran et al., 1995).

First, Farran and colleagues (1995) described the *experiential* process of hope (pain of hope) as the way hope and hopelessness are experienced in tandem. The authors described the dialectic between hope and hopelessness that is inherent in the experience of hope. Confronted with a hardship that elicits feelings of hopelessness, an individual is faced with what it means to be human and encounter the various trials and tribulations that challenge hope, thus creating an opportunity to hope in a new way (Farran et al., 1995). This new opportunity for hope is informed by the various realities we face as human beings (Farran et al., 1995). The next process described by Farran and colleagues (1995) is the *spiritual* context of hope (soul of hope). This

process likens hope to a sense of faith or, from a secular perspective, confrontation with meaning in life and death (Farran et al., 1995). Next, the *rational* thought process (mind of hope) that accompanies hope can be described as the way hope is grounded in reality and rational thought, exploring the ways one might approach hope (Farran et al., 1995). The last dimension of hope is the *relational* process of hope (heart of hope), which is defined as “something that occurs between persons – a relational process inspired by love” (Farran et al., 1995, p. 10).

The dimensions proposed by Farran, Herth, and Popovich provided the groundwork for qualitative explorations of hope. Much like Dufault and Martocchio, Farran and colleagues’ model provides an understanding of hope while respecting the dynamic and contextual embeddedness of hope in human life. In particular, these authors draw attention to the potentially painful aspects of hope. Other authors, including those in counselling psychology, have elaborated upon the idea that hope is a process that includes hopelessness and despair (e.g., O’Hara, 2013). Given that youth work is challenging and at times demoralizing, it is important to consider the interrelationship between hope and hopelessness if one seeks to understand youth worker hope.

**Benzein, Savemen, and Norberg.** In a phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis of interview data from healthy, non-religious, Swedish people, Benzein Savemen, and Norberg (2000) constructed a definition of hope as an internal and external process. The internal process related to ‘being’ and the external related to ‘doing’. The authors described these internal and external processes as reciprocally nurturing and influencing each other. In terms of the internal process of hope, Benzein and colleagues (2000) described this as a will to be and to live; it is an internal life force largely unaffected by external events and derived from an intrinsic sense of personal meaning. This internal feeling is an “experience in the present ... where the future is

enacted” (Benzein et al., 2000, p. 308). Another internal aspect of hope is the person’s feeling that he or she is connected to the world, understanding that the roots of human existence and life itself (of which he or she is a single part) is a never-ending cycle. The external aspect of hope in relation to ‘doing’ is influenced by the individual’s sense of goal setting and positive expectations similar to the aforementioned goal-focused theories (see Snyder, 1998). Importantly, the authors assert that this external aspect of hope is reconstructed in transition through the various developmental life stages (Benzein et al., 2000).

Benzein and colleagues’ (2000) conceptualization of hope is consistent with how I understand hope—that is—connected with one’s sense of meaning or existential significance. A person will feel hopeful if he/she has a stable and personally sustaining sense of meaning and a coherent understanding of one’s place in the universe and one’s situatedness in relation to motivations and actions (Benzein et al., 2000). This understanding of hope has heavily influenced my conceptualization of hope. In order to appreciate the possibility of multiple perspectives with respect to hope, as I sought to do in this study, one needs to appreciate that hope can be idiosyncratic and may be understood beyond goal setting cognitions and behavior. Hope can be intimately tied to the experience of being human. Interviewing youth workers about hope thus becomes intimate and personal. In asking questions about hope, I may be implicitly exploring what it means to be, to live, and to exist.

**O’Hara.** Another understanding of hope is that of Denis O’Hara (2011) who defined hope, generally, as a positive future orientation and an “individual’s capacity to believe in their own abilities and to take action towards that which they hope to see realized” (p. 324). O’Hara is one of only a few counselling psychologists to write specifically on hope in therapy. As discussed briefly earlier, like others before him, he too asserts that hope does not exist in the

absence of negative feelings. Hope is colloquially used both as a noun and a verb and the concept is defined in many ways, but consensus is generally found with regard to hope as a vital and essential energy for life (O'Hara, 2011). O'Hara discussed that despair is the opposite of hope and typically viewed as something to be avoided or remediated. O'Hara (2011) demonstrated by way of existential philosophy that despair is a necessary condition under which we must come to realize our limits in order to fully appreciate and understand our capabilities. Through experiencing hope and despair as a process that ebbs and flows, O'Hara (2011) argued that one comes to appreciate hope fully instead of participating in an illusion of largely unrealistic conceptions of one's life and future. This dialectical relationship between hope and despair, as O'Hara explored it, serves a vital purpose. For O'Hara (2011), helping professionals should seek to travel with clients through both hope and despair in order for the client to fully experience the rich and dynamic nature of hope.

Conceptualizing hope as a dialectical process, experienced in unison with despair informs my understanding of hope and thus the theoretical perspective of my study. Though O'Hara speaks primarily as a counselling psychologist, a parallel is easily drawn to youth work. As the lives of vulnerable young people tend to swing back and forth on a pendulum from hope and stability to despair and chaos, the youth worker accompanies that young person through these inevitable and often extreme experiences of life. From O'Hara's (2011) perspective, the helper must be a "good fellow traveller" and has two main tasks during this time: (1) "to allow clients to struggle and to do their own work in a context of empathic understanding, and (2) to be inspiring and to believe in the possibility of hope" (p. 327).

As stated above, for the purposes of this study, I gravitate towards the multidimensional, dynamic, and dialectic theories of hope because they are more consistent with my social

constructionist worldview and because I believe they are more relevant to youth workers serving at-risk youth. Though many theories of hope have been developed, I have chosen to highlight the theories which inform my understanding of hope and which delineate my understanding of what it means to hope. The importance of this acknowledgement is discussed further in the methodology section.

### **Hope and the Helping Relationship**

I would like to preface this section by drawing a connection between youth work, psychotherapy, and other helping professions. Though these professions are separated by context and perhaps numerous years of academic preparation, the processes by which they are effective could be said to have significant overlap. For example, from my experience in youth work, I came to appreciate the therapeutic power of micro-counselling skills, the person-centered perspective, emphasis on a strong working relationship, and my role as a helping professional to whom clients come for support. Next, I will briefly examine the psychotherapy literature and discuss the role of hope in these contexts as they share significant parallels with the profession of youth work.

**Client hope as a common factor in therapeutic change.** Within the psychotherapy field, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that change in psychotherapy can be attributed to elements common to all therapeutic approaches. Proponents of the common factors perspective propose that outcomes in therapy are more attributable to these common elements than to specific elements within theoretical allegiances (Wampold, 2010). Bruce Wampold, a prolific psychotherapy researcher, explored and synthesized the formidable empirical support for the common factors of psychotherapy in an impactful book entitled *The Great Psychotherapy Debate*. In this book, Wampold and Imel (2015) described the common factors or ‘pathways’

toward change as the therapeutic relationship, expectancy and/or hope, and the specific ingredients of psychotherapy (specific methods). Hope has consistently been listed as one of the common elements contributing to the effects of psychotherapy. In *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy*, Duncan, Miller, Wampold, and Hubble (2010) reinforced this assertion in highlighting that “many of the benefits of [psychological] treatment occur via the installation of hope and changed expectations” (p. 152). Specifically, Asay and Lambert (1999) estimated that hope accounts for approximately 15% of the variance in psychotherapy outcomes. Research supports the notion that hope is an important aspect of psychotherapy (Duncan et al., 2010; Hanna, 2002; Larsen, Edey, & Lemay, 2007; Snyder, 2002), leading some researchers to conclude that hope is a key agent in client change processes and a vital component of psychological healing (Koehn, O’Neill, & Sherry, 2011; Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013; Schrank, Stanghellini, & Slade, 2008).

**Hope for helping professionals.** A small body of research pertaining to the integral role of hope for the helping professional exists. Professionals involved in the helping professions can be said to hold hopes and expectations for their clients, which can conceivably affect the outcome of treatment. Existing research examining hope from the perspective of helpers has been focused on social workers (Koenig & Spano, 2007), reintegration counsellors (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010), and substance abuse counsellors (Koehn et al., 2011).

There are a number of theories that propose the process by which hope is transferred from helper to client. Scholars have recently challenged the assumption that helpers possess “a reservoir of hope” (Koenig & Spano, 2007, p. 46) that can be used to instill hope in clients. Some researchers assert that counsellor hope can have an emotional contagion effect, impacting and potentially uplifting hope for clients both implicitly and explicitly in psychological treatment

(Hanna, 2002; Larsen & Stege, 2010). There is some evidence and conjecture that explores the importance of helper hope to therapeutic outcomes. For example, in a small naturalistic study of 43 recipients of therapy, Coppock and colleagues (2010) found a significant positive relationship between therapist hope and therapeutic outcomes. This gives tentative but significant support to the idea that therapist hope can have an influence on therapeutic outcomes. In addition, Larsen and colleagues (2013) posited that “hope is offered in session when a psychologist can convey a genuine belief in, and hope for, the client” (p. 474). Given that counsellor hope is commonly understood to be an important factor in therapeutic effectiveness (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010) and positively correlated to client outcomes (Coppock et al., 2010), an in-depth understanding of the process of hope from the perspective of helping professionals, such as youth workers, is needed. It is crucial to study youth worker hope because it has been suggested that helpers who engage with difficult or resistant clients may lose sight of hope in their ability to help their client achieve their goals (Schroeder, 2005). When this happens, as theorized by some prominent theorists, vital processes of change can be compromised (Hanna, 2002; Snyder, 1995).

There is a fairly recent advance in the empirical investigation of hope that can shed light on the phenomena of helper hope. A recent empirical review by Howell and Larsen (2015) focused on the concept of other-oriented hope. This review explored existing research on the processes and effects of hoping for another person and how this process occurs in formal helping relationships. Other oriented hope or “vicarious hope” is defined as a “future-oriented belief, desire and mental imagining surrounding a valued outcome of another person that is uncertain but possible” (Howell & Larsen, 2015, p. 2). Howell and Larsen (2015) asserted that is important for psychotherapists, social workers, and other formal caregiving professionals to maintain other-oriented hope. In addition, the absence of other-oriented hope is associated with feelings of

disengagement or burnout. Although research related to other-oriented hope is relatively new, it opens the opportunity for further empirical investigation of a construct that specifically refers to the process of hoping for others. My study focuses on how youth workers engaging at-risk youth experience hope. Other-oriented hope is mentioned here because it will likely become a part of the discussion with the youth workers, but will not be the focus of my study.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduces the extant literature on hope, including key definitions followed by an exploration of the difficulties associated with engaging at-risk youth, examination of the various conceptualizations of hope in the literature and their relevance to my work, and exploration of the literature pertaining to hope in the helping professions. In examining the literature, I found a few key strengths and a major limitation in our knowledge. In terms of strengths of the literature, at-risk youth and the mechanisms and risk factors that place adolescents at risk of negative adult outcomes have been well-documented (See Kidd et al., 2007). There has also been advanced exploration of the factors that can mitigate risk and promote positive life trajectories in the lives of these young people, specifically concerning positive, long term, mentorship (Dubois et al., 2007). In addition, the difficulties encountered by those engaging vulnerable young people provide the field with a continually developing understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to burnout in the field (See Barford & Whelton, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011). A considerable missing piece in the literature is any exploration of the positive psychological factors that keep youth workers hopeful in their work. Specifically, I found no study published thus far exploring hope for youth workers engaging at-risk youth. Hope has been explored for psychotherapists, substance-abuse counsellors, and reintegration counsellors. Until now, however, hope has remained unexamined in this subpopulation. Thus,



my study will address this important gap in knowledge.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Creswell (2012) defined research as “a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue” (p. 3). The first step in conducting research is to pose a question. The question I posed is: how do youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and education agency experience hope? This question guided my study. In the following chapter, I discuss the structure of my research methodology. This chapter is presented in several sections. First, I discuss the overall structure of my research paradigm. I then discuss my epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions as well as my theoretical perspective and methodological choices. Next, I discuss participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Lastly, I present relevant ethical issues as well as situate my study amongst the appropriate criteria for assessing qualitative research.

#### **Qualitative Research**

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is most appropriate when literature yields little information regarding the phenomenon of study and examination of in-depth perspectives is needed to understand and explore this phenomenon. The purpose of qualitative research is to explore the meaning that individuals create for a specific human phenomenon or experience (Creswell, 2013). For the purposes of this study, I aimed to understand the experience of hope for youth workers who engage at-risk youth. The literature yields little to no information regarding hope in the context of youth work, and the purpose of my study was to understand this phenomenon in some depth. Qualitative researchers maintain several philosophical tenets about research. These assumptions, as outlined by Merriam (1998), are: (a) interest in the understanding of participants’ constructed meanings or worldviews, (b) acceptance that the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, (c) involvement of

fieldwork (d) utilization of an inductive research strategy, and finally (e) provision of a richly descriptive and detailed findings. In addition to these tenets, Merriam (1998) suggested that the design of a qualitative study is typically “emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions to the study in progress” (p. 8). According to Elliot, Fischer, and Rennie (1999), the central aim of qualitative research is to interpret, understand, and communicate in rich detail the way that a group of individuals engage with, experience, and make sense of a particular phenomenon. Qualitative researchers seek to develop an understanding of the research topic (Elliot et al., 1999)—in my case, the phenomenon of hope—through a dialectical process of co-construction or sense making with participants. As is discussed in the following sections, qualitative research is consistent with my worldview and serves as the best approach to answer my research question.

### **Methodological Framework**

There are important philosophical questions to be answered and assumptions to be clarified in order to answer any qualitative research question. Complicating matters, literature informing contemporary research methodology does not adhere to consistent terminology to describe aspects of the research process and the philosophical assumptions guiding this process (Crotty, 1998). As a new qualitative researcher, it was difficult to navigate the variable terminology and methodological variations in the field. Approaching my research question, answering it, and communicating this answer in a way that is theoretically coherent was highly important, but challenging. I was referred to an author by the name of Crotty (1998) who proposed a framework for social research processes providing researchers with a methodological structure for exploring social phenomenon. This structure is made up of four components that give researchers the opportunity to clarify the methodological foundation on which the research

question will be explored. Crotty (1998) identifies these aspects as epistemological assumptions, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Through clarifying the components of the methodological framework, the researcher proposes the philosophy of science and the “conceptual roots undergirding the quest for knowledge” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 127) that will guide the research study.

The following section offers clarification regarding the methodological framework of this study. The sections are not mutually exclusive, but serve to reciprocally inform each level of the research process from the epistemological and axiological philosophical assumptions to the specific methods of data collection and analysis. This structure provides a foundation for the philosophical underpinnings for the methods employed in my study. This methodological framework is also used to organize and provide clarity to the terminology used throughout the research manuscript (Crotty, 1998).

**Epistemology.** As defined by Schwandt (2007), epistemology is “the study of the nature of knowledge and justification” (p. 87). Applied to research, epistemological beliefs inform the goals, purposes, and assumptions of all methodological choices (Schwandt, 2007). Epistemology influences the questions researchers ask, the way questions are answered, and the way the answers are presented or communicated (Crotty, 1998). Put simply, epistemology is the philosophical assumptions surrounding how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998) and the relationship researchers have to any form of truth or meaning regarding the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013).

My epistemological position in this study was social constructionist. Inherent to a social constructionist epistemology is the belief that there is no objective truth or meaning except through our construction of it by means of engagement and social interaction with a world that

we concurrently interpret (Crotty, 1998). A social constructionist epistemology stands somewhere between a subjectivist (idealist) epistemology, which posits that meaning and truth are created by each human mind idiosyncratically and an objectivist (realist) epistemology which states that truth and meaning exist independent of human thought or engagement with the world (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism typically falls between these two paradigms because it posits that truth and meaning are created in concert between the interpreting subject and the inherent qualities of the objects or phenomenon this subject is experiencing (Crotty, 1998). A social constructionist epistemology joins together objectivism and subjectivism in the idea that knowledge and truth can only be constructed through an intimate connection between the individual experiencing the world and the object or phenomenon they are experiencing (Crotty, 1998).

It is important to distinguish between the similarly employed, yet conceptually distinct ideas of ‘social constructionism’ and ‘constructivism’ in social science literature (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism, as a philosophical perspective, posits that “individuals are continually engaged in processes of appraising their environment and acting on the basis of this sense-making process” (Mcleod, 2011, p. 52); this process is primarily cognitive and individual in nature. Social constructionism or ‘constructionism’ is similar to constructivism in the tenet that reality is constructed by individuals, but adds that this process is socio-culturally mediated (Mcleod, 2011). A central tenet of social constructionism is that reality is co-constructed dialogically through conversation and, to a broader extent, through relationships (Mcleod, 2011).

From the philosophical roots of social constructionism, it is important to apply this to research methods and understand the implications of such a perspective on the research study itself. An essential aspect of social constructionism stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) is “the

understanding that we are shaped by our lived experiences and these will always come out in the knowledge we generate as researchers and in the data generated by our subjects” (p. 104). The implications of this main assumption for social constructionist researchers are: (1) researchers attempt to capture complex and rich meaning from participants as opposed to narrow categorical ideas, (2) researchers attempt to understand the social context and culture that the participants inhabit in order to interpret the meaning that they construct, and (3) researchers pay attention to their own background and culture and how this might be relevant to the meanings they are constructing (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionist researchers acknowledge and explicate their presumptions and pre-understandings about the topic of research such that the research consumer can better understand the meanings constructed in the study. Most importantly, the researcher understands that his or her findings are an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and cultural environment (Creswell, 2013). Within a social constructionist paradigm, the researchers will often refer to the process of data collection as a co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2013), thus the researcher will not grasp the meaning conveyed by the participant in its entirety. Instead, the researcher and participants will co-construct a meaning that is mediated by the world of the researcher and the participant. This allows both understandings to be affected by the process to create a rich and thorough understanding of the research question.

**Axiology.** Axiological assumptions outline the role of values in the research process. Social constructionist researchers assume that values are intimately connected to the research process (Ponteretto, 2005). Values are not seen as biases as in positivist research, but are integral to the construction of socially relevant findings. The experience and values of the researcher must be acknowledged and described in the research manuscript, as they provide important

information in terms of the context of the constructed findings (Ponteretto, 2005). In my researcher statement provided below, I comment explicitly on my values as a researcher and practitioner and how these have informed and enriched my study.

**Theoretical perspective.** According to Crotty (1998), the theoretical perspective is proposed to clarify the assumptions underpinning the inquiry and provide theoretical grounding for the methodology and methods used to answer the research question. The theoretical perspective of this study draws on the hermeneutic or interpretive tradition. Hermeneutics can be described as the theories, principles, methods, and nature of human understanding (Crotty, 1998; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Hermeneutic philosophy or methods can be applied to most modes of communication (i.e., books, works of art, or verbal communication; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Hermeneutic theory is consistent with social constructionism in the assumption that understanding is a function of the cultural and historical context of the interpreter. Contemporary hermeneutics aims to bring enriched meaning and deeper understanding to human experiences while considering influence of the embeddedness of the interpreter in a historical or cultural context (McLeod, 2011). Though it is important to have a basic understanding of hermeneutics given its essential role in most qualitative research (McLeod, 2001), I hope to be more specific in my philosophical understanding of hermeneutics and ground it in the established work of early interpretive theorists.

Philosophically, the importance of the socio-cultural or historical ‘lens’ for interpreting phenomena is informed by ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ proposed by Gadamer (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics posited that human understanding evolves from one’s own historical reality (Porter & Robinson, 2011). We exist entwined in a tradition, that is, as a conscious mind whose interpretations are affected by our own history and

cultural situatedness (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Instead of dispelling our history and cultural existence as prejudices or biases clouding our judgment, these are seen as important, if not necessary, precursors to human understanding because they render meaningful and familiar the objects we interpret (Palmer, 1969; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Inherent in the task of interpretation is the attempt to grasp that which is alien (another's perspective); thus we must engage with any text in a way that renders it applicable and relevant to us (Palmer, 1969). In my study, I aimed to explore the experience of hope from the perspective of youth workers engaging at-risk youth. These youth workers expressed themselves within a different context from my own, and my interpretations are therefore represented. Obviously my cultural and historical context was not the same as the youth workers. My task was to attempt to understand the perspectives of youth workers by reconciling my worldview with the worldview of the participants to create a deep and richly descriptive understanding of hope in their work (McLeod, 2011).

Gadamer believed that knowledge could not exist without prior knowledge (McLeod, 2011). In other words, we cannot step outside our own context and interpret. We must instead accept and embrace our context and use it as a way of deepening what we can learn about the material and the relevance of what we find to our own context (McLeod, 2011). With the above acknowledgement, Gadamer posited that we must approach understanding or interpretation reflexively, openly, and dialogically (McLeod, 2011). Gadamer explained the importance of engaging with the object of study in a way that holds our presuppositions as opinions and ideas open to argument as opposed to steadfast rules overriding the meaning of the text (Porter & Robinson, 2011). As interpreters, an open engagement with the object of interpretation is important in order to develop meaningful interpretations that become familiar through the lens of



one's present and past embeddedness (Porter & Robinson, 2011). To understand any work, one must invite the work to question one's own preconceptions and 'fore-understandings' and let the meaning of the phenomenon develop in a way that is consistent with her or his unique situatedness in, and construal of, the world (Porter & Robinson, 2011). As an interpreter, I must allow the object of interpretation to take me past my 'foreknowledge' or prior understandings; thus I must let it show me something worth discovering or beyond what is already known (Mcleod, 2011).

Many processes of hermeneutics have been referred to in metaphorical terms, mainly used as heuristics to guide the interpretive method (Ellis, 1998). Chief among these heuristics is the hermeneutic circle or spiral. It is not only important to explain this concept, but dedicate attention to the way it explicitly informs methods of qualitative data analysis. The hermeneutic circle can be best described as the process of building an interpretation from a text or object of inquiry through a series of backward and forward arcs from parts of the text to the document as a whole (Mcleod, 2011). The hermeneutic researcher has two primary tasks while engaging in the hermeneutic circle: (1) to gain a coherent sense of the text as a whole and use this understanding as a way to understand fragments of the text, and (2) to use the meanings constructed for small segments of the text to inform, challenge, and reinforce our overall understanding of the text (Mcleod, 2011). This mode of inquiry is meant to help the researcher rigorously engage with the object of inquiry. It also helps to examine the research topic thoroughly and ensure that the findings constructed are aligned and coherent with the individual parts of the text and the text as a whole. Ellis (1998) explains that each segment (*forward arc* and *backward arc*) of the hermeneutic circle serves as a way for the researcher to structure their approach to the research topic. The 'forward arc' represents the researcher's initial encounter with the data. This process

is informed mainly by the researcher's autobiography and theoretical assumptions about the study and can also be referred to as the researcher's projection (Ellis, 1998). The 'backward arc' of the hermeneutic circle can be seen as a reflective process where the researcher attempts to (1) check if the initial interpretation 'fits', (2) see if there is anything that was missed or needs to be added, and (3) ponder the influence of *fore-structures* and *pre-understandings* on the initial interpretation (Ellis, 1998). Forestructure can be defined as the researcher's full autobiography or the historical/cultural situatedness of the researcher, and pre-understandings refer to the researcher's theoretical presumptions regarding the research topic (Ellis, 1998). This information is taken into consideration by the researcher, and then the data is approached again through another loop in the hermeneutic circle. A different understanding (and sometimes a different question) now inform this new encounter with the data (Ellis, 1998).

**Research methodology.** Following Crotty's (1998) framework, the next aspect of the research process is the methodology. This can be defined as the plan of action or strategy of inquiry used to frame and justify the use of particular methods (Crotty, 1998). Within this section, one should provide a clear definition of the research methodology, as well as a coherent rationale for the chosen methods and their relevance and congruence with the methodology utilized, as well as the theoretical perspective and epistemological assumptions (Crotty, 1998).

The strategy I used to answer my research question was Basic Interpretive Inquiry or Basic Qualitative Research (Merriam, 2009). Basic Interpretive Inquiry is considered a generic approach to qualitative research, as it does not ascribe explicitly to the primary methods or theories in the literature (Kahlke, 2014) such as phenomenology, narrative, or case study. Researchers using a generic qualitative or interpretive methodology intentionally refuse allegiance to one particular approach to qualitative research. Researchers using generic

qualitative approaches may align themselves with a particular established methodology, but may reject a fundamental characteristic of the approach that is irrelevant to the research goals or question. Other generic qualitative researchers may assemble a theoretically and philosophically congruent collection of techniques and methods to answer their research question (Kahlke, 2014). Basic Interpretive inquiry stands alongside Interpretive Description (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004) and Qualitative Description (Sandelowski, 2000) as a commonly employed, generic approach to qualitative inquiry. Justifying a generic approach to qualitative research requires an allegiance to the spirit of research in general, that is, an adherence to and pursuit of a question. Once a researcher develops a question that is likely to be answered through qualitative methods, the researcher occupies the role of the bricoleur (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The qualitative researcher is much like a 'jack of all trades' assembling tools and working through plans to best approaching the research question (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the role of bricoleur, being guided by the research question is of utmost importance. Qualitative research aims to uncover areas of study that have previously been unexplored. My study addressed a gap in academic knowledge, but also provided practical implications and insights fueled by new understandings of hope in the field of youth work. The goal for my research study was not to develop a theory or study a process as in grounded theory and it was not to uncover a common lived experience of hope. I wanted to understand – in terms that have practical and clinical implications – the factors and mechanisms underlying the experience of hope for youth workers. Returning to the metaphor of the bricoleur, my research goals demanded a pragmatic, flexible, and nuanced approach such that I could answer my research question while providing the much-needed heuristic value that qualitative research aims to achieve through establishing resonance with the audience (described below).

As Merriam (1998, 2009) described, Basic Interpretive Inquiry is the most widely used inquiry strategy for the field of education. Basic Interpretive Inquiry is premised upon social constructionist philosophy and hermeneutical theory, which is consistent with the methodological structure of my study (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009). In Basic Interpretive Studies, data are typically collected through interviews, observations, or text analysis and then analyzed and organized such that the researcher can describe, interpret, or understand the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998; 2009).

**The key role of the researcher.** Most important among the philosophical assumptions of Basic Interpretive Inquiry is that the subjectivity of the researcher is respected, acknowledged, and seen as virtuous (Merriam, 2009). Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, the subjectivities of the researcher will be reflected in the data collection and analysis and the overall structure of the study; findings constructed by the researcher will be laden with values and subjectivities. These subjectivities are seen as beneficial because they guide the researcher, through their understanding of the topic of interest and area of study such that they can make a more meaningful contribution to the field (Merriam, 2009). Acknowledging and exploring my understandings of the field and hope research literature helped me interpret and present the findings in a way that would be most useful to the field.

The above sections have been dedicated to a thorough explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of my study along with the structure of my inquiry paradigm, but I hope to let the reader know about the researcher as a person. The following section will serve as a brief introduction to myself as the primary investigator of this study such that the reader can understand how my experiences have influenced the construction of the findings and consider the results in the context of my pre-understandings, axiological assumptions, and personal

experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest.

**Introduction to the researcher.** I have always enjoyed being around and mentoring young people and adolescents. I am not entirely sure of the reason for this, but what I know for sure is that I enjoyed being an adolescent and I cherish the memories of my youth. My experience as a young person contributed fundamentally to the organization of my self-concept and set the stage for understanding who I am. I believe this is true for most people. The changes I went through as a young person and the people I had around me will continue to influence me for the rest of my life. I grew up with a fairly high need to fit-in and belong, a feeling of invincibility, and a peer group who engaged in relatively risky, impulsive, and deviant behavior. This combination, at times, came very close to moving me in a negative life direction. Being a teenager, I had to deal with intense emotions and experiences that most teenagers must deal with while trying to make sense of a seemingly fluid and developing sense of self and identity. In addition to the developmentally normative transitions experienced, I was achieving poor grades, getting into physical altercations, and engaging in multiple other impulsive behaviors during my high school years. The fact that I am now pursuing doctoral studies sometimes leaves me in surprise. When I was a teenager, I dreamt of pursuing a doctoral degree but it was a dream that I was not ready to pursue, as my behavior was not in line with these hopes. It felt as if I was being carried along by the influence of my precarious sense of self and my perceived need to become popular with peers whose values wildly differed from my own. It was not until I graduated high school that I was able to feel stable enough to confidently pursue a meaningful career and find myself able to approach new friendships and reconnect with mentors I always identified with, but never fully appreciated. It was not until the beginning of my undergraduate degree in psychology that I realized the mentors in my life whom I looked up to throughout adolescence

were able to help me more than they could possibly have realized. When I think about how I turned around during my university years, it showed me the malleability of my mind and the hope of perhaps making a similar difference in other adolescent lives.

Since I was 17 years old, I have worked with youth in a variety of contexts and circumstances. My passion for working with youth began largely as a passion for playing soccer and began to change as I was exposed to more challenging and rewarding contexts of youth engagement. I began coaching youth soccer in my late adolescence. I was fascinated with the process of youth mentorship and coaching. I found that the relationships I could build with youth as a coach and a mentor had a genuine influence on these young people. I was able to see how coaching a youth and teaching them skills for playing soccer was easily applicable to other aspects of their life. I also remembered fondly the relationship I had with my coaches and mentors as a young person and how each of these people contributed to my development. I immediately felt as if a passion was ignited within me to be in this role for other adolescents. Being in a mentorship relationship with a young person presents an opportunity that is unique from working with people in other developmental stages. When you open your heart and mind to a youth and you become a person to whom they can look up to and emulate, you can have a significant influence on who they become.

After coaching soccer, I became interested in working with at-risk youth. I think partly because I identified, not with the extremity of their behavior but with the nature and meaning of the behavior. I began to work on the front lines of child and youth care at the age of 19. I wanted to start early in order to gain experience working with youth in treatment settings. It was then that I started to develop foundational skills to pursue my goal of becoming a psychologist. I cherished working with youth in vulnerable situations. I appreciated the young people's

authenticity, and their resilience in the face of adversity. It was not until approximately three and a half years into my work with youth that I started to feel drained. I would repeatedly see youth fall and get hurt, betrayed, and wounded by the systems in place to help them. I began to feel as if I had little power to change anything in their lives. I began to resent the system I was working within with all the self-defeating loops, which seemed to undermine youth success. I also became numb at work. I felt as if nothing I did made any difference in the lives of these young people. Did other people feel this way? Who could I turn to? It was times like these that I felt hopeless. It seemed as if I was pushing up against barriers much larger than myself.

There were also times at work, which seemed to breathe life into me. Perhaps I would connect with a youth in a meaningful way, the youth would hit a significant milestone of achievement in their life, or come to a new and exciting realization. Whatever form this took, I knew that in these moments, I felt hopeful, invigorated, and renewed. I felt supported and more confident in my ability to envision a future in which I was a helpful agent of change in the life of my clients. I found that on these particular days, I was able to help envision a future with my client, my creativity was bolstered, my relational skills more attuned, and my affect spiraling upward. Energized and feeling purposeful, I would often end my shift feeling helpful and I often transferred these feelings of hopefulness into my next shift. At the time, I found these experiences of less importance but now that I look back and reflect on them, I am interested in how this occurred for me. What conditions were in place to help me feel hopeful? How did my experience of hope and hopelessness affect my clients? And how could I feel hopeful and engaged one day and then down and hopelessness the next?

In my experience working with youth, I came to realize that my experience was not unique. Those engaging youth at-risk are ordained with the difficult task of staying hopeful in an

environment that is not particularly hope inducing. As I embarked upon my graduate training in counselling psychology, I found myself in a unique transition between entering the clinically-oriented profession of psychotherapy while still holding onto my informal role as a mentor and advocate for youth at-risk. Most of my research and clinical expertise is drawn from experience with troubled young people, and I hope to contribute to understanding the factors that affect the lives of these young people. I know that youth workers play a large role in the lives of young people facing multiple adversities. It is worthwhile and timely to study the factors, contexts, and experiences that induce and inspire hope in those working with young people.

**Participants.** Participants for this study were selected using purposeful homogeneous sampling because I wished to select youth workers as a subgroup to gain a better understanding of hope in their work context (Creswell, 2012). Participants were selected from a federally-funded employment and education agency, which provides mandated services to youth considered at-risk. This agency is located in a central area of a large western Canadian city. To become more familiar with the context in which these youth workers are employed, I developed a research-related partnership with the agency and volunteered with them weekly for approximately eight months. In this capacity, I was able to develop a professional rapport with the workers and become somewhat familiar with the work they do and the contexts in which they work. This agency specifically served at-risk youth in the community. The agency provided a number of 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. There was a wide range of services available at this agency and the youth workers in my study represented youth workers from two different programs in the agency. Two of the youth workers were a part of the employment



training program and two were employed in an outreach capacity engaging youth in the community. The participants for this study were four youth workers employed as such for at least six months with the agency. Two male workers and two female workers were interviewed. The youth workers varied in terms of their prior experience with at-risk youth. Some of the workers had been in the youth work field for more than 5 years while others were newer to the field. In addition, the backgrounds of each of the youth workers were reportedly different. Some of the workers described that they came from similar at-risk backgrounds to that of the youth with whom they worked. I observed during my interviews that the youth workers also differed in the detail they provided in their responses to questions.

For the purposes of recruitment, my supervisor Dr. Denise Larsen approached potential participants. Letters were sent to each of the youth workers. Potential participants were asked to contact Dr. Larsen if they were interested in the study. It was stated in the letter that participation was fully voluntary and that there was no penalty associated with not participating. When the youth workers contacted Dr. Larsen, they were asked to provide contact information and the principal investigator (me) contacted them via email. Once the participants were contacted, a meeting was set to discuss informed consent (described more below) and address the research processes and any questions the participants had and then conduct the interviews.

**Data collection.** Data collection for this particular study took the form of audiotaped, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with participants. Through these interviews, I hoped to gain an in-depth understanding of how the youth workers experience hope in the context of their work (Merriam, 1998; 2009). The interviews were guided, structured and informed by Merriam's (1998; 2009) outline *Conducting Effective Interviews*. Some sample interview questions are listed in appendix A. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Upon completion of the

interviews, the audiotapes were played back and transcribed. I had the opportunity to interview each youth worker one time. Although the researcher and the participants agreed that there was a potential for a follow up interview, most of the workers instead clarified any misunderstandings via email when sent their individual codes. In addition, with funding cuts to their program after the study was completed, the potential for a follow up interview was not possible for some participants.

**Data analysis.** Data were analyzed using an approach consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA). TA is a common method for identifying and reporting patterns or themes within data sets. TA functions to facilitate the organization of data into richly detailed aspects of the research topic (i.e., categories or themes; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach uses a structured six-step data analysis method which guides the researcher through the following: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing these themes, (e) defining and naming the themes, and finally (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Importantly, data were analyzed with the understanding that the researcher played an active role in the interpretation and generation of codes and themes from the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The section below briefly demonstrates how data analysis unfolded.

In the initial phase, becoming familiar with the data, I transcribed all of the interviews, which allowed me to immerse myself in the interview data. I then read and re-read each of the transcripts while writing notes in the margins to support my comprehension of each interview and the data set as a whole. During the second phase, generating codes, I used a word processing program to highlight sentences and phrases to highlight features of the data. In terms of analysis, I analyzed the data within participants at first and then transitioned to a focus on connections and

themes across participants. During the coding process within participants, I created codes that identified meaningful features of each transcript in response to my research question. I then collated the codes—along with the phrases and sentences represented—and copied each of these codes into four separate documents representing each participant’s interview. I then sent these codes to the participants for member checking. After the participants reviewed the documents, I began analyzing the codes for categories and themes across participants. I copied the collated codes onto cue cards of four different colors. Each color represented a participant. I compiled all of the cue cards and spent time reviewing the cards and grouping them into themes. After organizing the codes into meaningful groups, I reviewed the groupings and constructed definitions that captured the group of codes. These definitions were deemed to best represent the themes. I then organized the themes into higher order categories. The terminology used to describe the results of qualitative research is oft inconsistently employed. For example, Merriam (2009) describes that the terms category and theme can be used interchangeably whereas Morse (2008) describes them as fundamentally different terms. I chose to organize my data into themes and categories. For this particular study, categories were used as higher order representations of several similar themes constructed from the data. Themes were constructed based on similarities in the data themselves and assembled based on their similarity to construct larger categories. Once categories were constructed and finalized I began writing, refining the themes and categories iteratively through a writing process in consultation with my supervisor.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Approval was sought and granted for this study through formal application to the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB). Conducting research in the field of counselling psychology, I adhered to the professional ethical code of conduct in research put

forth by the Canadian Psychological Association. I also strove to adhere to the standards of the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the ethical conduct of research involving humans.

The Code of Ethics for psychology in Canada holds Respect for Dignity of Persons and Responsible Caring as important values to uphold in conducting ethical research in the field of psychology (Truscott & Crook, 2013). In alignment with these values, those conducting research involving humans must ensure that certain processes and standards are adhered to with regard to informed consent and participant confidentiality. For my study in particular, these issues were relevant and thus discussed below.

**Informed consent.** In alignment with the value of respect for dignity of persons, each person in my study was provided with a voluntary and informed consent process prior to participation in the study. In the profession of psychology, consent is considered an ongoing process negotiated on the basis of ongoing dialogue with the participants (Truscott & Crook, 2013).

The supervisor of my study approached each volunteer in order to reduce any potential for coercion, given that I had preexisting relationships with prospective participants. Each individual who volunteered to participate provided his or her name and contact information to my supervisor, and I then contacted participants via email to invite them for an interview. Prior to interviewing the participants, I read through the informed consent form with them, educated them about the purpose and process of my research along with the risks of participating in the study. I also assured the participants that withdrawal from the study could happen at any time prior to the data analysis phase of the research process without penalty. Next, I strove to make clear that their participation in the study, along with their interview transcripts and audio recordings, would be shared only with the investigators in the study. Lastly, I answered any

questions that the participants had and assured them that participation in the study was completely voluntary. I also stressed that ongoing communication between the participants and myself was encouraged should any questions or concerns arise during their participation in the study.

**Confidentiality and anonymity.** In alignment with the value of Respect for Dignity of persons is the respect for privacy of each participant. Privacy is assured to participants by ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity is pursued for all participants. Although our study was not fully anonymous as my supervisor and I knew whom the participants were, confidentiality could be assured to the participants. To ensure confidentiality in my study, each interview I conducted was transcribed and anonymized by omitting names and other identifying information from the transcribed document. Any reference to the transcripts in the form of quotations or excerpts was used with identifying information omitted. Additionally, the name and location of the agency from which my sample was drawn was omitted from the manuscript to ensure that all participants' identities were protected. Further, each transcribed interview was kept only on an encrypted computer within a password-protected file. Additionally, since the in-depth interviews were with employees at a small agency, identifying information was kept out of the data excerpts in the transcripts to ensure the program supervisor and colleagues were not made aware of which employees had participated in the interviews.

### **Assessing Qualitative Research**

Quality standards in qualitative research are continually evolving. In qualitative studies, the subjective mark of the researcher is unavoidable and thus the results can hardly be judged by the same set of consistent standards of truth and accuracy as quantitative research (i.e., reliability and validity). The academic literature surrounding best practices for qualitative research is quite

robust with many writers commenting on guidelines for publication and insights for carrying out excellent qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Mcleod, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Indeed, ensuring that qualitative research is considered good can be approached many different ways. The common approach in this respect is through consulting the current literature on best practice in the field.

In an important article by Tracy (2010), the author synthesized the research on quality standards for qualitative research and came up with eight overarching patterns in terms of how qualitative research is assessed across different theoretical approaches. Although these standards are recent and comprehensive, the standards are not specific to qualitative research in the field of psychology. In the field of counselling and psychotherapy, Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie provide the most widely used guidelines for evaluating qualitative research (1999). Through consultation with expert groups in the field, these authors created the ‘evolving guidelines’ for evaluating qualitative research. Though I chose to use this frequently cited method for evaluating my research, it is important to stress the evolving nature of any attempt to appraise the rigor of qualitative research. Since the tenets of social constructionism and qualitative research tend to adhere toward relativism, standards to assess the same field must be understood in this vein as an ongoing cultural conversation with changes occurring as the significance and meaning of qualitative research evolves. In the following section, I review the criteria put forth by Elliott and colleagues (1999), recognizing that there is significant overlap with Tracy’s (2010) standards of quality.

Elliott et al. (1999) proposed seven evolving guidelines to evaluate most forms of qualitative research. These seven values are listed as: (1) owning one’s perspective, (2) situating the sample, (3) grounding in examples, (4) providing credibility checks, (5) coherence, (6)

accomplishing general versus specific research tasks, and (7) resonating with readers (Elliott et al., 1999). The following criteria will be defined briefly and discussed in terms of their application within my study.

In terms of owning one's perspective, Elliott and colleagues (1999) described this as the author's explication of his or her theoretical perspective, as well as personal anticipations and understandings of the research topic and how these develop as the research progresses. In this document, I make an intentional effort to bring forth and develop my theoretical perspectives and assumptions regarding hope and its connection to helping situations and change processes. I also explore with the reader my understandings and assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, which further clarify how I looked at my question and how it will be answered.

Situating the sample involves providing the reader with a developed understanding of the life circumstances of the participants such that the reader can contextualize the findings and data (Elliott et al., 1999). In this study, I spent considerable time attempting to understand the work-life of the participants by volunteering with the organization and building relationships with the youth workers. I communicate my understandings gained in this experience through describing the environment of the agency. I do this in order to honour the context and work environment of these workers and also to provide readers with an opportunity to determine transferability of the study. I also researched, from a wider perspective, the profession of youth work to come to a clearer understanding regarding the cultural context of the youth work field as a whole.

Elliott and colleagues (1999) stated that the researcher should provide excerpts from the data in order to illuminate how interpretations were reached and offer the reader an opportunity to appraise the quality of the author's interpretation. Grounding in examples also allows the

readers to re-conceptualize the interpretations into new understandings for themselves. In the results section of this work, I provide evidence in the form of one or more interview excerpts for each category and theme as evidence that my findings were informed by the data themselves.

Elliott and colleagues (1999) posited that providing credibility checks is important to ensuring the quality of the constructed findings. Tracy (2010) stated that credibility is “the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (p. 842).

Credibility can be achieved through strategies such as (1) ‘member checks’ or discussing findings with participants and eliciting feedback, (2) collaborating with an ‘auditor’ or team members to discuss findings, or (3) using ‘triangulation’ or combining other methods of data collection (Elliott et al., 1999; Tracy, 2010). With regards to the third strategy for establishing credibility, triangulation, I prefer to employ the metaphor of crystallization. Triangulation typically refers to using multiple data sources, methodologies, and theoretical perspectives in order to increase the accuracy or truth of findings. Crystallization is a metaphor used to describe the process of employing multiple methodologies, theoretical perspectives and data sources but, as a chief goal, crystallization aims for more complex and nuanced understanding of the data (Tracy, 2010). The strategy and goals of crystallization fit better with my social constructionist epistemology. For this particular study, to ensure credibility, I engaged in member checking. At this phase, I invited participants to give me feedback to check understandings of the interview data. Additionally, throughout the data analysis phase, I consulted with my thesis supervisor who has expertise in qualitative research methods and hope research. I also met with a monthly “Hope Research Discussion Group” at Hope Studies Central throughout my data analysis phase. At each of these meetings, I discussed my findings and elicited direct feedback from the group. These meetings were a unique opportunity to assess the credibility of my findings with peers in allied



professional and academic fields, each with unique perspectives and different interest and expertise in the area of hope.

The last way I employed crystallization was by taking notes and participating in programming during my eight months of volunteering with the organization of interest. I would often reflect on my time there and came to understand their program and the professionals in an intimate way. Though my interviews were the primary mode of data collection, my time spent at the organization provided me with another window into the program, which deepened my understanding of the working contexts of these individuals as well as the clientele they engaged.

Another quality criteria proposed by Elliott and colleagues (1999) is coherence. Coherence is defined as how the final results ‘fit together’ while honoring nuances in the data. To establish coherence, the author might create thematic maps or structural diagrams, which seem to ‘cohere’ and reflect the whole-part relationships within the raw data. For this study, I also used manual means to code and thematize the data as opposed to using software. Using this manual approach to data analysis gave me an intimate and material connection with the data themselves, allowing me to organize and reorganize physically the categories and themes. Additionally, at each stage of data analysis, I discussed with my supervisor and discussion group members to check that my findings fit together.

The sixth quality criteria proposed by Elliott et al. (1999) is between accomplishing general versus specific research tasks. It is important to clarify whether your study aims to achieve *general* research tasks like examining and representing general conclusions that can be applied to others in similar situations, or specific case-wise conclusions which cannot be applied to those not involved in the study but instead provide in-depth, detailed understandings of relatively unique manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. A good qualitative study should

represent a match between the research tasks allegedly achieved and the methods used to achieve these ends. For my study, I hoped to achieve a practical understanding of hope through interviewing four youth workers. I aimed to provide the field with heuristics that could be applied to other youth work situations and also provide new understandings of youth work that can enhance communication between academic circles and the profession of youth work. Therefore, my goal was to achieve a general research task while delimiting my sample such that the reader can determine applicability and transferability.

The last criteria proposed is that the research should resonate with readers. Elliott and colleagues (1999) posited that resonance is presenting the research material in a way that those reading the results develop a new appreciation for or understanding of the phenomenon of interest. In Tracy's (2010) definition of resonance, the writing must have aesthetic and evocative qualities and be presented in a way that others can understand and with which readers can personally identify (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). In my study, the goal was to foster increased discourse between academic research and professional practice of youth work. Another goal was to resonate with the field of youth work in a way that provides validation for the struggles youth workers encounter. I also wanted to identify the ways that youth workers stay hopeful and engaged. I had the intention for other youth workers to pick up the article and feel a renewed sense of hope in their work. Lastly, I hope to use this document to affect policy changes by providing practical insight into the practices that best supported hope in these particular youth workers. With these goals in mind, I aimed to use language in this document that would be helpful for anyone in the helping professions. I also hoped describe youth work in a way that would allow individuals to have an appreciation for the challenges and triumphs of working with at-risk youth.

## **Summary**

This study was conducted to examine experiences of hope from the perspectives of four youth workers employed at an inner-city employment and education program for at-risk youth. Using Crotty's (1998) methodological framework, this chapter outlined my theoretical perspective. I presented my social constructionist epistemology, interpretivist theoretical perspective, my methodology (Basic Interpretive Inquiry), and my methods (TA). Methodological choices related to data collection, interviewing, and participant selection were also presented. Ethical considerations were then covered including reference to the Tri-Council Policy Statement for research involving humans and the Code of Ethics for Psychologists in Canada. This study employed Merriam's (2009) Basic Interpretive Inquiry to better understand hope for at-risk youth workers. Data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012), and Elliott and colleagues' (1999) criteria for publication (further informed by Tracy's [2010] guidelines of qualitative research) were used to evaluate the findings of the study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The following chapter outlines the constructed research findings. The research question for this study is: how do youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and education agency experience hope? All participants identified hope as a crucial resource in their work and were candid and open in exploring this topic in the research interviews. Youth workers readily offered their understandings of hope and were able to provide me with in-depth understandings of how they experienced hope at work.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

My research impressions are important to the findings of this study given my social constructionist approach to this research endeavor. These impressions provide richness to the findings and through such reflections, I provide the reader with an in-depth look at how I constructed the categories and themes. Throughout the presentation of the findings, I will provide personal reflections and impressions to give increased clarity to the concepts presented. I also hope these reflections can acquaint the reader with the context of the youth organization within which the participants worked and thereby deepen contextual understandings of the findings. I begin with a description of my felt understanding of participating in research conversations with youth workers in this study.

While conversing with the youth workers, I was thoroughly engaged and felt as if the youth workers were trusted experts on the topic of hope; they had many spirited ideas about the concept. The energetic conversations often turned in unexpected directions, and I frequently found myself following the youth workers down conversational paths I had not anticipated. We had many laughs during the interviews, and I felt as if I was sitting down for coffee with a familiar friend. I found their authenticity and genuineness enviable qualities that seemed to shine

through in their interviews. The workers readily answered questions and explored unique aspects of their personal worlds, which seemed to bear upon their experience of hope at work. I was truly grateful for this, as discussing hope can often lead to sensitive conversations and it did. I was open to exploring sensitive topics and grateful that they trusted me with the same. Indeed, hope was something the youth workers seemed to be intimately acquainted with in their work life. They explored the concept as if it were something they had discussed many times before, offering profound insight into the concept. It was evident that hope has a home in the working context of these youth workers. Each worker also valued constructing deep, personal relationships with youth and building success. All of the youth workers provided me with rich insight into the youth work and offered unique therapeutic wisdom that I will utilize throughout my career.

Communicating with these professionals had a deep impact on my understanding of hope and my perspective regarding the nature of professional helping relationships. My perspective regarding the experience of hope for these professionals was shaped by my appreciation for their work. I believe that the appreciation and admiration I hold for these professionals impacted the findings I constructed in a meaningful way, offering richness and nuance to my interpretations. I also believe that I was able to create a meaningful, positive relationship within this organization, which led to richer and more committed exploration of hope with these workers.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will present the findings. I will also provide impressions and interpretive insights. It is my hope that through communicating the findings in this way, I will be able to make contact with the reader and provide a depth of understanding about the meaning making involved in analysis. The following section presents and explores each of the categories and themes.

## Introduction to the Findings

The five categories constructed were: (1) The Self and Hope, (2) The Atmosphere of Hope, (3) Fostering Hope through Perspective, (4) Hope Experienced in Relationship, and (5) Socio-cultural Factors. Each of these categories and themes will be explored in detail below and are presented in Table 1 in the appendix.

### The Self and Hope

Youth workers participating in this study experienced hope at work through a sense of self or self-affirming actions. For youth workers it was important to be their authentic selves at work, interacting genuinely with clients and acting congruently with their personal values. Youth workers described these processes as important to their overall experience of hope. The youth workers felt that who they were at work influenced their hope for youth, the way they engaged with their colleagues, who they hoped to be for their youth, and their sense of integrity. This aspect of hope was not necessarily experienced in a concrete, future-focused, and goal-oriented sense. Instead, hope was described in terms of an implicit feeling associated with actions, which affirmed, expressed, or nourished a sense of self for each youth worker. Three themes were constructed within this category: *being real*, *walking the talk* and *establishing boundaries*. Each of these themes is presented below with illustrative quotations.

**Being real: Authenticity, genuineness, and honesty.** Most of the youth workers said they felt able to be themselves at work, which supported feelings of hopefulness. For some of the workers this meant being free to express their unique way of being in an unhindered way. For others, this meant being genuine and honest with youth and staff at their workplace. The workers referred to most interactions with youth as authentic and genuine offering the youth an opportunity to be themselves in return. Inviting authenticity from the youth by expressing oneself

authentically was believed to be therapeutic by the workers. In this way, these youth workers experienced hope through an implicit understanding that he or she could be effective at work by expressing himself or herself authentically. As Reese put it:

*“I can talk like them; I can swear once in a while and it’s not that big of a deal.. I can make fun of them and stuff and I don’t know if you could do that in a one on one session...humor 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”*

Reese also referenced parts of herself that she was able to express at work. Some of the workers communicated that important parts of themselves were aligned with the values of the profession (i.e., humor). This was seen as hopeful because it facilitated self-acceptance and feelings of effectiveness at work.

Most workers explained that they wanted to come across as open and receptive. The workers identified that they did not like shying away from interpersonal issues or disputes. Youth workers expressed they wanted to explore interpersonal conflicts instead of avoiding them so that the situations could be worked through. The workers wanted to provide honest and thoughtful answers to questions posed by youth. Being honest and expressive, as well as possessing the ability to communicate openly at work provided the youth workers with increased hope partly due to their increased ability to problem solve and work through difficult circumstances. When asked about her hope at work, 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 like just treat me nicely” ... I think it’s so simple yet something that like when else.. when do you do that in your life?”*

Another aspect of authenticity related to utilizing and learning from past experiences with hope. One of the youth workers, Dave, offered that previous experiences with struggling to find

hope provided workers with a personal resource and understanding of hope that could be utilized in work with youth. Youth workers brought hope into their work by bringing what they had learned about hope and sharing it with youth. When asked about hope in youth work, Dave explained:

*“When you become a youth worker they don’t teach you on how to have hope. You have hope before you get into any type of profession because somewhere along the line in your life, you need hope for those difficult situations that are happening to you as an individual person”*

Dave drew a parallel from his personal life into work life. He saw hope as something that everyone has inevitably experienced in life and is often utilized in the profession. The experience of hoping and maintaining hope as a youth worker was influenced by personal experiences with hope in the past. Being aware of these past hope experiences while working with youth had an impact on how hope is experienced by the worker in the present. Accessing personal experiences with hope was described as an authentic experience in itself and represented one of the ways youth workers expressed their authenticity.

Youth workers were willing to be authentic at work and sought to engage in this behavior. This was expressed in a willingness to be themselves at work and an openness and expressiveness in communication. Being in touch with prior experiences and understandings of hope were also a part of the authentic work experience. Being real at work through connecting with and expressing their authentic self was important to hope for all of the workers.

**Walking the talk.** When asked about hope at work, some of the youth workers referred to being a role model and ‘living’ what they taught. Congruency between the youth workers’ values and behavior seemed to influence hope by affirming a sense of integrity at work. This congruency involved being a role model to youth while acting in alignment with self-identified values. For example, youth workers presented instances when they utilized an important situation



to model a certain character trait for the youth that might have therapeutic value. In an instance where Betty was in conflict with one of the youth, she mentioned that processing the conflict, staying calm, and being okay with mistakes was important modeling for her youth and gave her hope during tense or difficult disagreements with youth. Betty shared:

*“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: “it’s okay to make mistakes”*

The youth workers stated that their sense of hope was bolstered at work when they could model a hopeful orientation or hopeful actions in times of struggle. Many of the youth workers shared that when they were feeling low hope at work, they would share these feelings with youth to demonstrate resiliency, persistence, and hope. For example, Dave believed that his behavior set a precedent for youth, and he needed to offer the youth a model for how to stay hopeful in the face of despairing situations. He shared that ‘walking the talk’ was not only important for his hope at work, but it was fundamentally important to the relationship he was building with the youth. When attempting to instill hope in youth, Dave stressed the value of acting congruently with personal hopes:

*“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”*

Dave illustrated that he found it important to model hopes that are realizable for youth. He explained that acting in his own life in a way that is out of line with what he hopes for youth could be detrimental to the relationship. Dave also appeared to make the implicit connection

between trust and hope, illustrating that inspiring ‘inauthentic hope’ or false hope by acting out of line with important values could compromise the relationship.

Several youth workers mentioned that modeling traits like humility, openness to learning, uniqueness, or boredom could be potentially helpful to the youth. Workers offered examples of these experiences in our research conversations. The youth workers identified that each opportunity for modeling arose spontaneously, but was nonetheless considered therapeutically valuable to their work. Being able to model situations that arose in the youth worker’s life gave them an opportunity to engage more authentically with the youth, not having to hide aspects of their lives from the clients. Being able to use these human experiences allowed honest and positive role modeling, which fostered hope in the youth workers. The youth workers described many situations where they felt they could act naturally, make mistakes, and thus morph potentially negative situations in their life into valuable learning opportunities for the youth. Most of the youth workers described that they felt safe being themselves when sharing mistakes and imperfections. Perhaps the youth workers felt affirmed and comfortable being themselves and this helped them feel more hopeful at work. Betty offered a demonstrative quotation:

*“Yeah. Not that I have done all these amazing things in my life but I am a happy person I think I live life the way I want to. .... Yeah and I think a lot of times too it’s [about] normalizing... life for them ... I think a lot of youth feel like they are so different or like they have a disability and they need all this help ... some days they are like “uuuuuh ohhh my life is so boring” ... My life is so boring too, like I went home and I read a book or like I had a nap and so just kind of paralleling that too like it’s okay to go home and watch TV sometimes it’s okay to let your laundry to pile up sometimes...”*

**Establishing boundaries.** This theme relates to youth workers establishing personal boundaries in their work and how this influenced their experience of hope. In connection with the other themes, engaging with work authentically and genuinely was a difficult process involving significant personal investment. Youth workers communicated that attempting to address personal needs and boundaries while engaging at-risk youth was an ongoing learning

process. Some youth workers also mentioned that setting limits on their own personal accountability for youth outcomes was an important aspect of maintaining hope at work. The youth workers seemed to understand a lack of boundaries as a barrier to hope and establishing clear boundaries as protective of hope. None of the workers felt they were able to establish perfectly clear boundaries with their work. Indeed, youth workers reported that hope in the work environment is experienced through a careful balance between investment and separation from youth issues. Betty shared her perspective:

*“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 also stated that it was sometimes difficult for her to separate herself from youth failures:

*“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 fully could remove myself. It’s just about finding that balance and making sure I am taking care of myself”*

Isaac also offered that sometimes the struggle with boundaries could present as a barrier 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”*

### **The Hopeful Work Atmosphere**

In our research conversations, youth workers stated that their workplace context played a role in fostering experiences of hope. These contextual factors included the themes: circles of hope; youth presence and involvement; community, inclusion, and solidarity; and supported flexibility. The youth workers highlighted that the positive aspects including some of the norms

and formal social structures of the work environment positively influenced their experiences of hope at work. These aspects of the work environment kept the workers engaged and present in their work while promoting youth worker hope. Included in this category are aspects of the work atmosphere and staff relationships, as well as formal institutional structures such as aspects of programming or practice guidelines.

**Circles of hope.** When asked about the hopeful places at work, most of the workers referenced the circle meetings conducted by staff at the agency. Before exploring this theme, it is important to provide some contextual information regarding the circle process itself. The circle process is a therapeutic activity employed by the agency that draws on traditional aboriginal peace-making practices to promote togetherness and shared learning between group participants. The circle process was central to the operation of the agency and was used in most group meeting processes that occurred during programming. For this circle process, a circular seating pattern was utilized along with a process aimed at checking in with youth. The approach served to establish immediacy in the program by processing what was currently occurring for the circle members and what had happened throughout the day. The staff conducted these circles with the youth and with the staff themselves at meetings. The process was a simple one; each person is encouraged to speak, but only when holding a 'talking piece'. The talking piece was typically a randomly selected object. The talking piece was passed around in one direction and no one was skipped. Usually, accompanying the talking piece was a question that the leader posed, to which each member of the group would respond. Sometimes this question would be something specific to the tasks of the day and other times it would be related to processing immediate feelings or current events in one's life. An important ritual of the circle was that no other person could speak when another was holding the talking piece. Some of the workers referred to these circle

meetings as a practice that bore significantly on their experience of hope at work.

Some youth workers stated they felt a shared therapeutic responsibility with youth while in the group, in part due to the rules of the talking piece. The workers seemed to be communicating that the burden of helping the youth change was not solely placed upon the workers. Some workers commented that the circle process helped them to remain focused on the moment and offered equal opportunity for everyone to share including staff members who often contributed genuinely to the conversation. Workers sometimes spoke of the circle process in a spiritual way, indicating that sharing in circle was a way to ‘put pain out into the world’ thereby offering a release of tension. Youth workers felt that circle time had the effect of lifting therapeutic burdens on youth workers. Additionally, youth workers commented that circles in the mornings allowed them to see youth show up to program in spite of the various difficulties they might have been facing. This experience helped them to feel inspired and hopeful. As a researcher, I had the opportunity to participate in some circles and came to appreciate the therapeutic power and hope associated with them.

Reese offered her experience of hope during these meetings:

*“It’s about relationships and I find our circles are a really great way that we can build those and we can experience a shared hope”*

Betty shared that her experience of hope was influenced by morning circle:

*“I think there is so much hope in...morning circle. Seeing all these faces ...because so much happens ... the outside world is a crazy place and it’s hard for them to kind of deal with that.... I think in morning circles ... especially check ins to see ... the hope ... yeah people showed up today and even if all these crazy things happened last night they still feel safe and comfortable and supported even if they feel like crap...”*

Reese offered her interpretation of the shared therapeutic responsibility in circle and how this influenced her experience of hope:

*“At the beginning they are very awkward they don’t know each other. [After] they have been in the program for a while and they know each other it’s not just the responsibility of us as facilitators to comment. Like someone will pass the talking piece and they will say: “oh well I had a really rough weekend and it really sucks because of this” and they pass it on the next person and they turn to them and say “well that really sucks and I am sorry to hear that”... so I think that’s part of it too. Umm I feel hopeful because it’s not only me as a staff that has to worry about saving all these kids”*

The circle process seemed to offer the staff an opportunity to trust in the circle process and help the youth establish hope as a group. The idea that it is not only up to the youth worker to establish and maintain hope is significant and aided to reduce tension in the workers. A part of allowing me access to the research setting was the agreement that I would periodically participate in the circle process at the agency. As a result, perhaps my own reflections on the circle process can add further understanding of the process and its association with hope for the youth workers. While I was participating in the circles, there were times where the process seemed like magic and I often found myself in awe of the sacred nature of the ritual. My impression of the circle process was also influenced by the profound and spirited investment each of the staff and management had in the circle process. Most workers identified it as the most central component of their programming. When I participated in circle, I had the impression that I was taking part in a ritual that had an immense therapeutic power. Indeed, I felt hope, joy, sadness, frustration, and confusion in the circle while participating, but did not feel a need to withhold this experience from others in the group. I felt that whatever emotion, thought, or feeling arose for others or me in the group could be processed in the group. Perhaps this aligned with how youth workers found a sense of shared hope in circle. Each person learning to share in their own authentic way while processing their emotions with the group offered the workers and the youth a sense of togetherness and hope.

**Youth-friendly environment.** This theme related to youth being present and involved in the work site. Depending on the context of the agency, some youth organizations allow youth to keep in contact and return to the site upon completion of the program. At this particular site there was an ‘open-door-policy’ that allowed youth to return and associate with staff and clients upon completion of their programming. The agency also allowed youth to use resources and utilize the services at the site whenever they felt the need. Staff members were also provided with personal phones and computers to contact youth over social media or text message in order to increase contact between youth and workers. Most of the youth workers stated that having the youth come back and discuss their life helped the workers to transcend the daily struggles involved in their current work-life. Returning youth also offered the workers an opportunity to participate with the youth in celebrating successes. Being in contact with youth at the site seemed to support youth worker hope. For example, if a worker was experiencing despair in terms of their current work circumstances, they felt renewed hope if they engaged with other youth at the site or had another youth come into the facility to chat. When this happened, youth workers were given an opportunity to see how they helped certain youth. The youth might also have increased opportunities to show appreciation and develop a deeper relationship with the workers. Reese offered that when youth came back to the site, it helped her see that her relationship with the youth mattered and this enhanced her experience of hope at work. For youth workers, the knowledge that the working relationship was meaningful to a youth sustains hope. The relationship provides a window that enables youth workers to observe the success that the youth are experiencing. Perhaps when youth would return to the site, this provided youth workers with access to stories of success, which supported hope. 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 what. In periods of time... in the past where I do 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"*

It may be that there was reciprocity in the experience of hope when former clients returned to the program. Reese described that many youth felt that the environment was safe to return to and share. This return was beneficial to both the youth and staff members. The agency is a place where youth can build relationships with the workers and then return and be involved with the programming as a welcomed guest. Allowing the youth to tell their hopeful stories to youth workers provided a support for the hope of the youth workers. Staff would engage and facilitate hope with youth. Eventually this support returned to youth workers as hope when youth returned. In colloquial terms, the site served as a kind of hope recycling program with sustaining relationships going both directions.

Many of the youth workers stated that institutionalized events celebrating youth success and progress were times that youth workers experienced hope. Betty communicated:

*"I still I love graduation day ... because this is a huge accomplishment for a lot of them like they are finishing a program like that is amazing and...their grad speeches are always so amazing at recognizing where they were at before...and to seeing how they progress[ed] and how they have been supported to be themselves and how that is a positive thing ... yeah I think that always helps to keep hope"*

Additionally, some youth workers mentioned that it gave them hope to see some youth participating in volunteer activities and contributing to the daily maintenance or programming provided by the agency. When asked about factors that influence his hope, Dave offered:



*“You have the youth that are coming here joking around with you laughing, partaking in the programming, being invested to giving their time for such things as you know the community garden that was done, cleaning up the premises”*

Youth would often come and go through the building, chatting with staff and using the resources at the facility. The youth were always respectful, and they had fascinating, engaging stories to share with the workers. Sometimes these stories would involve great success; other times they would involve failure and loss. Either way, the youth would come back to the building and share stories with the workers. It was touching that the youth workers were so friendly with these youth, and often interacted as if they were life-long friends who, while having been separated, started again where they had left off.

**Positivity and humor.** The staff at this agency seemed to share a common sense of humor and positivity. The managing staff made clear that humor was chief among the organization’s strategies for maintaining a positive team atmosphere and bolstering hope. They were specific about the humor they liked and considered it “dark” and, at times, potentially offensive or cynical. Each youth worker stated that humor was essential to moving forward and staying hopeful. The youth workers shared that humor was ubiquitous in their work and could be found in nearly every aspect of their programming. The sense of humor they shared encouraged the workers to feel hopeful, connected, and part of a family. Humor offered a sense of belonging and with that, hope, even when the humor itself might have been considered cynical. Humor was used as an intervention, an opportunity to role model, a coping resource, and a source of motivation. Betty provided details:

*“We love humor. Humor makes the world go round ... whether it is total black humor that we have as a team and like some people I am sure would be absolutely appalled and offended by some of the stuff we say but like that’s how we work through it”*

It is possible that the workers' sense of inclusion was reinforced by a shared sense of humor. This inclusion that the workers experienced contributed to their experience of hope. Additionally, some workers identified that the staff engaged in specific activities that encouraged small hopeful moments. These activities included writing humorous jokes on the bathroom walls.

Reese commented on the effect of humor at work to her experience of hope:

*"It's a fun environment too [...] we just laugh all the time. We finish each others sentences and we are really like family there its cool"*

Reese also shared:

*"In both the women's and men's staff washrooms we have decorated it on the inside with like funny pictures and stuff. Because sometimes ... you just got to go to the washroom right so you sit down and you look at this thing and you laugh a little bit so ...I guess there is hope there, right."*

Some of the workers described that humor was used as a coping resource to lift staff mood and promote feelings of hope and motivation. Reese offered:

*"We're always able to laugh with each other and poke fun at each other in a way that just lightens the mood of whatever we are working with that day"*

Positivity was also a part of hope at the agency. Workers reported that staff were optimistic, motivated, and energetic. When asked about aspects of their work that fostered hope, many of the youth workers provided examples of the positive environment fostered by their coworkers and the uplifting positive relationships between colleagues. Several of the workers mentioned that if one was having trouble at work, many people seemed to be willing to help and offer support. Dave commented:

*"It just. It's a good environment because when you're feeling down people's attitudes and behaviors lift your spirits"*

*"So just the work environment is, is a tremendous lifter. Everybody saying "good job" "good work" Just leaning on one another helping each other out"*

**Community and solidarity.** The sense of community that youth workers experienced at work and how this related to hope was a robust theme. Every youth worker mentioned they felt welcomed and supported at this agency. Some also mentioned they felt dignified by the work environment. A few of the workers explained that hope was experienced as a result of the agency demonstrating equality through its anti-hierarchical structure. When asked about hope at work, Isaac shared:

*“At [agency] it’s different in the way that it’s not so stratified. If you walk into the office you wouldn’t be able to tell by where people sit like who does what”*

Youth workers described knowing that other staff members were willing to help out when they were struggling with something. Some individuals described the environment at the agency as similar to a village where the health and wellness of each member is dependent upon communal support from the whole village. Several workers mentioned that they were able to draw hope and inspiration from each other when needed as well as share feelings of hope. Agency wide staff meetings were identified as a place where the workers were able to experience hope together. During these meetings, staff were able to share how their programs were operating and list some of the recent positive developments. Some of the staff reported feeling excited for the staff meetings and felt especially excited for staff meetings involving new members of the agency. Reese offered her understanding of this phenomenon:

*“The staff meetings [are] great too... I can’t imagine life without those because once a month you get to check in with the other teams. Because sometimes it can feel like we’ve got blinders on ... sometimes you kind of forget to check in with other teams and see what they are doing and hear their success stories so often so sometimes we will start with a round of what’s something really amazing that someone in your program has done recently just to keep it more [as a] collective sense of hope”*

Most of the youth workers also drew attention to the sense of solidarity they experienced at work. They expressed that this solidarity was experienced through awareness of consensus

between staff at the agency with regard to the purpose and goals of youth work. The understanding that members of the agency possessed common goals supported the workers' sense of hope. Perhaps this was due to the workers feeling as if they were united moving forward with their work and had a robust community guided by similar core values.

Some of the youth workers illustrated that an important aspect of hope for both workers was inclusion, with isolation and exclusion being significant barriers to hope. Perhaps most importantly, the workers referred to the care that others showed them at work as genuine, which bolstered feelings of hope. Genuine caring between staff was not considered the usual pleasantries in conversation at the office, but genuine exploration of their personal lives and real efforts to get to know co-workers as people outside of their work roles. Reese summarized this experience:

*“We have two new staff that just started today and everyone is already going around and introducing themselves and it's not like ... just for good measure.... People are genuinely really interested in who you are when you come into the building... I have never worked in a place where I have felt so cared about. They really actually care about not just, yeah not just the youth and the clients... but they care about the whole organization. Because it's kind of like a village. Like the health of the village and the elders is the health of the children. Like if we don't take care of each other as staff then we are not going to be in a good spot to take care of other people.”*

The workers highlighted that working within a team was something that helped them experience hope but in times where they felt isolated or excluded from others, they often felt feelings of hopelessness and despair. Betty made a statement about the importance of support to her hope:

*“I have that team of support - I have done frontline work before where I really didn't have that support and that's why I ended up leaving [...] I can't fully do this on my own I need people to support me [...] I am so happy to have a support of my team, that I can be myself, I can have crappy days, I can be super frustrated and storm into the office and just like... go crazy for a minute and then calm down and then go back and keep teaching. I have the space to do that instead of holding it all in”*

**Supported flexibility and openness to innovation.** This theme related to the workers' experiences of hope through being supported to make independent decisions and act flexibly and creatively with youth at work. Hope was supported at this agency through the organizational policies and management strategies reflecting openness to change, flexibility, and respecting staff voices. Several of the youth workers reported feeling heard and respected in communication with people in the workplace. The youth workers shared that they had a lot of expertise and they felt this was recognized, utilized, and listened to by management and funding agencies. 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 proposal we will talk about how to change it to make it better... [or] figure out how to change if 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”*

In our research conversations, a few of the workers stated that their voices were elicited and sought after in the work community. Further, the workers reported that they felt as if they could ‘make the program their own’ or modify programming in the moment to suit the needs of the youth. This may have offered hope to the youth workers because they felt supported to engage and build relationships with youth in their own personally unique way. Indeed, the youth workers expressed that the policies in this agency emphasized flexibility. Most of the workers felt they could employ their own personal judgment regarding interventions and relationship building. Betty provided an illustrative account of this point:

*“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 like we are here for the youth for 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”*

It seemed that workers felt that the management trusted the workers and had faith in their abilities and skills in youth engagement. This influenced the workers' sense of hope at work because it contributed to the youth workers' sense of confidence that they could adequately address youth need. Through the youth workers feeling supported to engage youth in their own ways, the workers were more able to demonstrate therapeutic creativity, behavioral flexibility, and contextual adaptability based on youth need. Some youth workers described that they could 'try things out' to see what would happen. This was hopeful because the workers knew that they would not receive reprimand for such actions. Betty commented on this:

*"If I had to follow the exact same plan everyday... 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."*

One of the workers stated that youth can be so variable in terms of readiness for change and general ability that it is difficult to engage every youth with one activity. Thus, feeling supported to be flexible and creative while engaging youth was something that gave the youth workers hope. The youth workers felt they had the option of engaging with youth as they saw fit given each unique circumstance.

Another notable aspect of this theme related to the innovative cultural milieu of the agency. The staff members at this organization strove to be original in their youth engagement strategies, and the agency would thus push boundaries in terms of current youth work practice. Many of the youth workers described how their practice was different from the way youth engagement has been conceived and approached in other settings. Indeed, the cultural attitude of this organization was described by one of the workers as aligned with the phrase "pushing the envelope." One worker described a situation in which a funder changed their policy because of the way this agency pushed the boundaries on a rule for reporting client outcomes:

*“We, as part of our reports, write [a] story. I guess that was originally a misunderstanding or something... we weren’t supposed to be doing reports like that but we did reports like that [anyways]. We always like to push the envelope... which is good and awesome that we are encouraged to do that”*

The youth workers made reference to this cultural attitude as something that supported their feelings of hope because they felt a collective sense that they were pushing boundaries and innovating. Perhaps thinking of themselves as leading the field, or finding new ways to engage youth, gave the youth workers hope because their work was seen as cutting edge and provided other support agencies with a reference in terms of how youth work can be approached differently. Some of the workers expressed that they derived hope from understanding their work as highly unique and norm challenging.

### **Hopeful Perspectives**

The theme hopeful perspective relates to that of a hopeful cognitive orientation held by the workers. The youth worker perspectives described in this theme show how particular orientations toward work supported youth worker hope. In the research conversations, youth workers described perspectives that seemed to be supportive of hope in their experience. These perspectives were (1) planting seeds, (2) humanizing stories, (3) purposeful work, and (4) focusing on the positive. The following section explores the four themes of hopeful perspectives that these workers shared.

**Planting seeds: Broad and long-term conceptualizations of change.** Youth workers had a unique, flexible, and broad perception of the change process and the various paths to success for youth. Change was seen as a long and gradual process. Each worker held multiple narrative understandings of how change could occur with youth. Workers viewed change from a long-term perspective considering failures and setbacks in the context of the larger narrative of change. Workers mentioned that success stories helped cultivate this perspective of change in

times of low hope. A few youth workers who endorsed this particular cognitive orientation approached youth work from the perspective that their work may not cause immediate changes in the youth's life. This idea offered a way of understanding that change is a process, which takes time. Instead of focusing on changing the entire life of a youth, youth workers often approached their work in terms of 'planting seeds of change.' Isaac provided the following:

*"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 also shared:

*"Like plant those little seeds that maybe they don't fully get now but... we get lots of youth that'll come 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 seed planting metaphor held significant importance in terms of how youth workers held onto hope during difficult times. Perhaps the idea that one is planting seeds of change for the youth's future helped workers remain hopeful in their work during relational ruptures or relapses in youth's negative behavior. It could be that these workers connect to feelings of hope that their planted seeds could one day grow into significant behavioral changes. The youth workers held onto their feelings of hope by maintaining a broad understanding of their role in youth behavior change. Reese commented on this process:

*"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 look back and be grateful that they had a space to explore who they are and build some of those skills that are essential in life"*

In a few instances in our research interviews, the workers admitted to feeling frustrated that change took such a long time. Sometimes the workers reported feeling hopeless when one of their youth would fall and not get back up. Some of the workers also described that during times



like these, thoughts of youth success stories and narrative understandings of change were a resource, which cultivated their experience of hope. Often, the youth worker's narratives of youth change involved a youth coming into the program, failing, and then returning with renewed hope and resolve to finish the program. The common narrative thread that wove throughout these stories was the idea that the youth made the decision to change and this provided a sense of hope to the worker. It also may have reinforced the idea that youth workers played an important role in youth change processes, but were only a small part of larger changes that need to occur in the life of youth over time. This potentially helped the youth worker conceptualize change as a process, but also helped to put some of the responsibility for change on the youth. Perhaps these more broadly storied understandings of change processes are protective of youth worker hope because they offered a more flexible and hopeful understanding of their own role in facilitating positive changes in the lives of youth. This perspective also helped the youth workers to reflect upon their significance and role in the lives of youth.

**Humanizing stories.** Youth workers described labeling (or pathologizing) as a barrier to hope. Conversely, the youth workers described the promotion of humanizing narratives as a part of their hope at work. Understanding the holistic story or context leading a youth to engage in negative behavior encouraged hope by offering helpful understandings of the difficulties youth faced. These stories also provided a framework for understanding youth from a strength-based and humanizing perspective. Betty commented on humanizing the youth:

*“It’s nice being able to actually like sit down and talk about it and from a human perspective... they are not numbers ... No it’s a youth that have had all these things happen and they choose to come here which is amazing so like how can we make [their lives]... better”*

Assisting youth with telling and re-telling their own stories helped the workers better understand them and also fostered better understanding from others. Labeling youth served to

weaken the relationship as well as undermine therapeutic change. Labeling represented a barrier to the opportunity for understanding the youth and thus helping them. This provided a significant barrier to youth worker hope.

The youth workers described that writing reports to funders was often difficult and served as a barrier to hope because of the “crazy lives” they often deal with and the short, goal-focused reports that funding sources demand. Betty shares her struggle with constrictive report writing:

*“Usually with funding somebody else writes the proposal and we write the reports but you can only write so much in a report. We deal with crazy stories and we can only write about a portion of that if we could write about what happens day in and day out ... We would be writing reports for like the next 20 years”*

Betty mentioned that she actively worked against the restricting, all-encompassing societal labels while attempting to re-conceptualize the youth’s struggles in the context of the youth’s personal stories. Organizational practices were consistent with this understanding; a clear example of concern about labeling was identified in the reports to funding agencies. In reports to funders, the youth workers attempted to write in storied form to symbolize the youth’s journey up to this point. When facilitating the intake process, youth workers encouraged youth to tell their stories. They were able to establish a working narrative understanding of youth struggles in the context of a broader life-story through this process. Providing youth with a space to humanize themselves through stories supported youth worker hope because it helped to contextualize youth issues and introduce strength-based avenues in which youth workers could help youth.

**Purposeful work.** Youth workers described that their experience of hope was tied into their perceived sense of purpose at work. The youth workers described feelings of hope when they perceived their work as imbued with purpose. Youth workers shared they felt their role was difficult to define, but nonetheless was a significant and impactful one and this understanding

supported worker hope. The youth workers felt less hopeful during times when they were engaged in menial tasks such as driving between pick-up locations or as Reese put it: “plug[ging] away like a robot.” Some of the youth workers described their agency as a place where no role was too small and everyone knew their role. Having an influence on the youth’s lives served to bolster hope in the sense that their work felt more invigorated and purposeful. 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 commented on 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 connected to the worker’s perceived ability to make a meaningful contribution to the agency as a whole. Dave commented on this idea when asked about maintaining hope at work:

*“No role is too small ... or unimportant. Everything that we do here has meaning, has purpose”*

Although the perceived sense of purpose derived from work was important to hope, some workers commented on the objective moral value of youth work as a career. Isaac described that he saw youth work as a morally commendable thing to do and this seemed to support his hope and perceived sense of purpose at work. Isaac described this in the following excerpt:

*“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.*

Experiencing a sense of purpose for their role at work served to foster hope for youth workers. Understanding the meaningful role they played in their youth’s lives, work community, and the larger-scale global community seemed to motivate them at work. Some of the workers shared how others reacted to their work. The workers stated that others would often convey

surprise and envy for the character and valor of the youth worker. The workers appreciated the respect others held for their work and this appeared to be protective of hope at work.

**Focusing on the positive.** Focusing on the positive was a robust theme about which the youth workers spoke at some length. It refers to an underlying cognitive orientation geared toward finding strength and positivity. This orientation influenced hope by offering workers ever-present opportunity to view things in a positive way. Most of the youth workers drew attention to the importance of focusing on the positive by identifying hope as essential to the practice of youth work. Dave even mentioned:

*“If you don’t have hope as a youth worker, you are doing the wrong job.”*

The workers maintained a focus on the positive when the collective understanding of at-risk youth appeared to focus on the negative. Youth workers highlighted that seeing strengths as opposed to deficits and focusing on possibilities as opposed to limits were both important to sustaining hope at work. When asked about hope, Isaac shared:

*“You get very cynical about things that are going on in the world... and it’s just like what’s the point but ... what brings me hope for this next generation is...Everything is incredibly fast paced; [negative] information it’s almost overwhelming. You need to filter the noise. They’re able to. They’re growing up in this generation where they are constantly adapting and that’s going to make them resilient. That’s going to make them successful”*

He added that seeing strength in the youth as opposed to deficits was part of staying hopeful:

*“Instead of looking at [youth] deficits... build on their strengths. They’ll be better people because of what they have been through. They will be strong and wise...”*

Many of the youth workers drew attention to the negative cultural stereotypes and negative information individuals outside the profession (and sometimes within) might possess. The youth workers described these stereotypical understandings as ‘news stories’ about at-risk young people or youth violence. An implicit hopeful aspect of youth work included the workers’

persistent focus on challenging the predominant cultural conversations about youth to become more positive. For example, focusing on the positive achievements that the youth accomplished is important. If people only notice the negative aspects of youth behavior, these youth are being further marginalized. Betty commented on her effort to make stories more hopeful:

*“It’s something we are trying to shift... let’s talk about the exciting stories the little hopeful stories; the successes. In life ...we end up focusing on the negative and I am trying to do a lot of my teaching [about] labels ... we always end up looking at the negative things we hear about the youth in the news, because they are stabbing each other, because they are stealing stuff. I do a [teaching] section on peer helping [for youth and] it’s like: let’s look at young people who are doing amazing things in the world... whatever you consider to be young and whatever you consider to be amazing... [They are] are going to look up somebody and tell us all about this person [so] we can just see what other cool things are happening”*

In order to change cultural conversations and stay connected to hope in their work, youth workers mentioned that they needed to always search for and be aware of the positive aspects of the work the various strengths youth possess. The youth workers referenced that focusing on hope and positivity was difficult at times and often based upon small successes, but it was seen as imperative to celebrate these small successes. Focusing on and celebrating small successes and small hopes demonstrated the workers’ positive focus. Betty commented:

*“Recognizing that especially with hope like it can just start as such a small little thing... and same with success... [Success] doesn’t mean that somebody has to go to university and have a fancy car and all this stuff. [Success is more] like: ‘no they showed up today. Yay! That’s awesome’”*

### **Hope in Relationships**

Youth workers reported feeling their hope was influenced through the relationship with young people. As youth workers entered into relationship with young people, hope came to be entwined in the experience of this relationship. The youth worker held hopes for the youth, built a relationship with them, and was thus affected by the youth’s behavior in this relationship. Being in personal relationships with the youth bore upon hope for the youth workers and affected

how hope was experienced at work. Through building a real relationship with youth, the workers came to experience genuine hope for the youth's positive progress and success. The themes within this category were (1) establishing connection and (2) youth-centered partnerships.

**Establishing connection.** This theme related to the youth worker focusing on the relationship as the most important aspect of effective youth work. Workers expressed that the relationship and trust building were the main purposes of initial and ongoing contact.

Understanding the importance of the relationship supported hope at work through helping the youth workers underline the goals and primary objectives of their work. All therapeutic tasks were seen as secondary to forming a trusting, secure relationship with the youth. Dave offered a statement about this idea:

*“Building that relationship and that’s the basis of where I start my youth work. That’s the most important thing to me”*

Reese discussed how hope was often found in the relationship with youth:

*“If you think about the structure of my day like I am kind of a teacher in a way but... [teaching] is never really where the hope comes in. It [comes] through the “after stuff” it’s the relationship it’s not the content that we care about...it’s not about me teaching this content it’s about us continuing our relationship and our journey. If they get something practical out of it that is great”*

Dave also stated that through his relationship with youth, he hoped he could be a person who cared about the youth and supported them regardless of the title he held. Fostering a genuine connection with youth and engaging with them in a real relationship involved personal investment in this relationship. Dave described the relationships he builds with youth as him being genuinely “a part of someone’s life”; he mentioned that he did not require payment or a job title for this.

Establishing a connection seemed to mean more to the youth workers than simply building a relationship in order to engage in therapeutic work. The relationship was seen as the

primary purpose of their work with youth. Dave stated that a youth worker's job is to bring to the surface youths' hope by establishing a safe connection with them. In this sense, Dave shared that youth who were betrayed in the past may have been compromised in terms of their capacity to have hope in others. According to a few of the youth workers, building hope for youth was premised upon ensuring that the youth have someone who was present and cared about them. Giving the youth hope, in this respect, could be symbolized as meeting the needs of the youth and building relational intimacy and trust. When the relationship with a youth was jeopardized, through losing contact with youth or another worker damaging an attachment bond with the youth, the youth worker saw this as a barrier to hope because the worker would have to re-establish connection and trust. The relationship was seen as the main therapeutic tool at the youth worker's disposal. This supported youth worker hope by giving them access to a vital agent that the youth workers could utilize in their work to achieve positive outcomes. Additionally, the building of the relationship was also seen as a channel by which any other progress could be made and served as a mechanism by which the youth worker could stay in touch with the youth. Relationship building was also a mechanism by which to hear success stories, which were fundamentally important to a hopeful environment for youth workers.

**‘Starting where they’re at’: Youth-centered partnerships.** The youth workers frequently spoke about building helping relationships by *starting where the youth were at*. The connection between this theme and hope was primarily implicit meaning that the participants did not address this connection explicitly. Instead, they appeared to imply a connection based on how they responded to questions about hope. When asked about hope in their work, the youth workers spoke at length about the nature of the youth work relationship as a youth-centered partnership. The youth workers described letting the youth have control of the therapeutic

endeavor. They shared that they accompanied the youth and acted like a guide or partner on a journey of change. Hope may have been derived from this attitude because the youth workers did not hold onto too much responsibility for leading the therapeutic process. Dave expressed that he would often tell youth that he worked for them as opposed to the other way around. The statement ‘meeting youth where they were at’ was metaphorical and implied walking alongside youth and accompanying them toward change. Going in the direction that youth wanted to go in terms of changes meant listening to what was occurring in the youth’s life. Placing the youth first in the relationships and letting them lead the process of change fostered hope for youth workers because the relationship was able to grow faster. This relationship, as previously mentioned, was seen as the primary tool for youth workers to facilitate change. Dave shared:

*“If I expect these youth to learn from me I have to learn from them... How can you teach if you’re not willing to learn? It’s unfortunate you know there’s some professionals in this world that look at a young person and [say] “oh what are they supposed to teach me” “I’m the professional I know it all you have to follow what I tell you, kid” but if that’s the type of attitude you’re bringing to the encounters you have with the youth, the youth are going to catch on to that. The relationship will never grow, you know. If you have a plant. And you give it water but no sunshine, it’s not going to grow”*

Putting youth first also meant sharing the therapeutic burden with the youth and helping them adopt some accountability and responsibility for change, which bolstered youth worker hope. Isaac mentioned that he held hope that he could be whoever the youth needed him to be, establishing a youth centered connection. Betty added both the worker and the youth had to agree on problematic life areas and therapeutic goals, otherwise it was unlikely to be a successful partnership. Perhaps being led by youth helped workers identify what was important to the youth in terms of change. Reflecting on the youth worker’s conveyed messages, I came to understand that hope was experienced through following youth down a path of change. Youth workers were there to support them and inspire them but it was primarily the youth who needed to identify



their areas of work and take action. Betty highlighted how she attempted to get the youth to take responsibility for their therapeutic actions:

*“Sometimes we barely do anything for them and they think it’s us that does everything. Actually I had some texts the other day too when I was in training [it read]: ‘thanks again so much, you did so much’ I [replied] ‘Nope it wasn’t me. It was you. We are here every day but it was you that chose to be here, it was you who wanted a job, it was you who showed up to the interview, it was you who did all those things like it wasn’t me’”*

### **Socio-Cultural Factors**

The last theme represents the socio-cultural factors that were perceived as out of the youth workers’ control, but impinged on youth workers’ hope. These factors represented major systemic barriers to the youth workers’ experience of hope. The factors were political barriers, cultural barriers, systemic barriers, and issues with inter-professional collaboration. Socio-cultural factors included experiences like combatting cultural narratives, issues with funding and contracts, and systemic barriers such as mental health treatment, criminal justice administration, or homelessness.

The first aspect of this theme related to the way youth workers felt in response to cultural messages and pressures faced by at-risk youth. Betty mentioned that some cultural messages threatened her feelings of hope:

*I think [there is] a lot of blaming and... there are so many stereotypes whether it is with mental health issues or addictions or homelessness... [and] these issues are [often] not the way that a lot of people think they are. So then some barriers [to hope]... [are]: now how can we help this person to move to forward instead of like [blaming]... let’s not care whose fault it is - and what does that even mean – let’s move forward [instead]”*

Cultural narratives encouraging blame and inaction represented a barrier to hope for youth workers. Youth workers were primarily working from a framework that discouraged blame and encouraged compassion and helping. Being within a larger cultural system that tends to hold youth personally culpable for life events and negative choices might give youth workers

a feeling of hopelessness. These systems may be more focused on correcting youth behavior rather than understanding the behavior in context and fostering long-term systemic change.

Another aspect of this theme related to funding requirements and funding contracts and how these served as a barrier to worker hope. Similar to other organizations serving at-risk youth, this agency received time-limited funding from the government. This government funding was primarily dictated by evaluation of outcomes and fluctuations in economic allocations. This agency was involved in continual applications for government funding and seemingly endless search for resources to move forward with their program. The youth workers at this agency described that the funding application and evaluation process involved highlighting progresses that may be unrealistic for the youth they engage. Many of the workers expressed discouragement in response to the structure of the funding process. They shared that the expectations of funders were unrealistic and not considerate of youth contexts. Isaac commented:

*“You deal with like a lot of disappointment. Disappointment with the way that funding works ... Just the way that funding is only for so many years and there is like an evaluation and they might continue to keep your funding... just always trying to get that next bit of cash to sustain [the program]. That’s the challenge for non-profit is that they are always kind of at the mercy of like the next government that is coming into power and we’re seeing that right now with the oil revenues dropping and it’s like. “How is this going to affect us going forward?” I am hopeful that I have like enough of a specialization that I can differentiate and that’s what I hope.”*

Youth workers may have experienced funding pressures as a significant barrier to hope because of the inability to visualize their career extending much further into the future than the next renewal of funding. Even though Isaac enjoyed his work, his hope was compromised by the idea that the future of his work could be cut short by funding changes. Betty and Reese commented on government contracting being a barrier to hope specifically concerning the unrealistic expectations they felt were being placed on the agency and the youth when funding contracts were renewed or changed.

Another critical aspect of this theme was related to the contrast of wealth one saw as a youth worker in the community. Reese commented on the state of the provincial economy and the unsightly contrast between the wealth of the province (at the time of this study) and the resources allocated to youth at-risk. Reese offered insight into how this influenced her hope in her daily work life:

*“We were just talking about housing today and one of the girls just became homeless. We were looking up resources and there is nothing. We live in such a rich province and city and yet someone loses their housing and they can get temporary shelter but other than that, not much...and it frustrates me because this is a person that is really trying to make a change”*

Youth workers struggled to support youth while concurrently attempting to grapple with the current economic realities in the province. They commented on how at-risk youth were not provided with enough support economically. The youth workers expressed feelings of despair regarding the lack of support given to these youth, but some of the youth workers expressed hope for new government policy informed by youth voices. The youth workers described that empowering youth to be heard and understood in the construction of new policy made them feel hopeful. Youth workers identified funding and policy as changeable aspects of the political landscape in which they worked. In addition, some of the workers saw these potential changes as within their sphere of influence. Indeed, some of the workers connected to the idea of being somewhat of a social activist in this regard.

Another barrier to hope the youth workers described were the challenges they faced when youth received services from multiple professionals. Some of the youth workers were concerned about the degree to which other sectors of service provision were not using youth-centered, responsive, and compassionate service delivery methods with youth. For example, the youth workers described that complicated and undiagnosed mental health needs were barriers that the youth workers were not always equipped to address. They also felt great concern regarding the

ability of the current mental health systems to address these needs for youth. Other systems, such as the judicial system, the family intervention system, and the system in place to address homelessness, were described as barriers to youth worker hope. For example, Isaac offered comments on the judicial system:

*“[Mental health issues often] lead a lot of [youth] to be incarcerated and then they’re getting [support] while they are in that they wouldn’t have received had they not gotten in trouble with the law. So where can we come in and intervene before it comes to that? A lot of them wouldn’t access counseling if they didn’t go to jail. [Also] there is a lot of housing in the city that is...for people that are [released] so yeah and I just think that it is ironic that you have to get into trouble before anyone takes notice and you get what you need”*

This worker’s hope was challenged by the way the judicial system and mental health system may not have been providing vulnerable youth with proactive and responsive care. In my research conversations with the youth workers, the workers presented that they wanted to be a part of improving the care that these systems provided such that these services would be more beneficial to the youth. Betty, Dave, and Reese described that systems designed to support youth were, at times, significantly detrimental to outcomes. According to the youth workers, this challenged hope.

The last aspect of this theme related to the youth workers’ hope to trust, collaborate with, and work alongside other professionals in order to promote balanced and effective service delivery. The youth workers described that collaboration with other professionals providing services to youth was often difficult and presented as a barrier to hope. Lack of communication and service coordination were seen as specific barriers to hope because the youth workers were often left without understanding regarding the varied support services a youth may be accessing. The workers mentioned that the youth had many different workers and that it was difficult to build relationships with these professionals and develop trust because the objectives and motives of these professionals were unclear. This lack of trust stifled hope because many of the workers

expressed concern that the services may be working against each other. The hopeful side of this theme was the solutions youth workers offered in response to this struggle. The youth workers expressed interest in collaboration and connection with other programs and service providers.

Though the youth workers' hope was significantly challenged by a perceived lack of collaboration with other professionals Betty offered an approach to this issue:

*“We [want] ... to be that organization or that program to make some of those connections and encourage probation officers to come to our building to meet with us and the youth there so we can also talk about how we can provide support and move forward in different ways.... Having social workers come and having housing workers come and just trying to bring everyone together so that everyone can focus on the youth [and] provide support... work together to do something”*

Understanding and being familiar with other programs while coordinating services was hopeful for the youth workers and provided an answer to the question of how hope can be bolstered in youth workers. The idea of youth workers connecting with other professionals and acting as a liaison and intermediary professional synchronizing the different service delivery methods was a provocative and hopeful idea produced by the youth workers.

### **Summary**

The aforementioned findings were constructed through in-depth analysis of conversations with youth workers. The youth workers offered nuanced and dynamic understandings regarding their experience of hope in their work, which helped me construct a large array of rich findings. From my research conversations, I constructed the following categories: (1) hope and the self, (2) the hopeful atmosphere, (3) fostering hope through perspective, (4) hope experienced in relationship, and (5) socio-cultural factors. Each category and theme was defined, explained, and supported with illustrative quotations from participants.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The following chapter explores each theme sequentially and (1) reviews the finding in terms of theoretical implications for the concept of hope, (2) situates the finding amongst relevant psychological literature, and (3) presents areas of further research. I provide a brief review of the categories and themes while expanding on their relevance to the field and their value to the extant research. After discussing the themes and categories, the end of the discussion section will draw on the findings to provide practical implications to the field of youth work and counselling psychology.

### **The Self and Hope**

Youth workers were able to use their sense of self as a source of hope at work. Youth workers communicated that expressing an authentic sense of self, acting in congruence with explicitly personal values and nurturing themselves or setting boundaries influenced their experience of hope at work. Hope, in this respect, was not focused on client outcomes but was instead experienced through the workers ability to be authentic, congruent, and self-nurturing.

The theoretical connection between hope and the self is not new, but it has yet to be explored comprehensively in hope research. In a comprehensive review of hope literature, Elliott (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). Current research has drawn similar links between the self and hope. In a study focusing on psychotherapists, O’Hara (2013) found a positive relationship between hope and self-differentiation. Self-differentiation referred to an individual’s ability to maintain autonomous thinking and a coherent sense of self while in relationship with another person (O’Hara, 2013). In addition, in their study on client experiences

of early counselling sessions, Larsen and Stege (2012) highlighted that instances of supportive identity development, or times when counsellors drew attention to positive aspects of the client's identity were hopeful moments for clients in therapy.

The above-mentioned literature shows the previously explored connection between hope and the self. Additional literature should explore this connection in-depth to provide increased empirical understanding of how hope and the self may be related.

**Authenticity and hope.** When asked about hope, the youth workers spoke at length about the value of authenticity. Recent research has defined authenticity as “the free and unhindered operation of one's true or core self in daily life” (Davis & Hicks, 2013, p. #). The workers expressed that their ability to communicate genuinely at work influenced their experiences of hope. There have been several connections found between authenticity and hope in recent research. In one study focusing on university students, Ahmet and Umran (2014) found a significant positive relationship between authentic self-expression and hope. Specifically, the authors found that accepting external influence and self-alienation (a lack of self-knowledge) were negatively related to hope indices, whereas self-reported authentic living was positively related to hope (Ahmet & Umran, 2014). Further, in a study examining the role of authenticity in the relationship between time perspective and hope, Davis and Hicks (2013) found that highly authentic individuals were more hopeful—where hope was understood as closely related to goals—in the face of limited time perspectives. The authors explained that individuals who could turn inward and understand their own feelings and motivations were able to more effectively engage in goal setting processes when they perceived their time as limited (Davis & Hicks, 2013).

Research examining authenticity and hope may illuminate a salient connection underlying youth worker hope and authentic self-expression. Perhaps youth workers who are in touch with their own personal motivations, desires, and inclinations are able to access hope during setbacks and function more effectively at work. This could be similar to the effect postulated in Davis and Hicks' (2013) research highlighting the importance of authenticity in the goal setting process. Authenticity and hope might be connected for the workers because they have an intimate connection with their own motivations and they may be able to more readily visualize themselves acting upon these motivations.

The process of hoping for others also required authentic expression. One of the youth workers reported that hoping for others was a process guided by one's own experience with hope. He indicated that if one was not in touch with personal hopes, it would be difficult to hope for others. Indeed, previous authors have confirmed this; social work researchers Koenig and Spano (2007) indicated that it is difficult to be hopeful for clients as a helping professional if one is out of touch with one's own personal experiences with hope.

The constructed findings pointed to a connection between hope and authenticity. This connection has not been studied in-depth. Future psychological research might explore this promising relationship to add to our understanding of hope and to provide insight to youth workers or other helping professionals.

**Walking the talk.** Another aspect of self related to youth workers' experiences of hope was the worker's ability to 'walk the talk' or act in congruence with personal values and principles. The workers expressed that congruence between their personally held values and the worker's behavior inside and outside of work were important to their experience of hope at work.



Though there seems to be no explicit link in the literature between congruence and hope, congruence has been shown to be a common factor accounting for successful outcomes in psychotherapy (Klein, Kolden, Michels, & Chisholm-Stockard, 2001; Kolden, Klein, Wang & Austin, 2011). In the psychological literature on motivation and emotion, researchers have found a connection between well-being and value-based-actions indicating that we can bolster well-being by acting upon important, intrinsically-derived values (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). This might, in part, explain the phenomenon underlying youth workers deriving hope from congruency. Perhaps youth workers acting in congruence with personal values were more able to hold onto hope because they ‘lived’ what they taught. These workers may have felt more confident in teaching youth and making a positive impact on youth behaviors.

This theme highlights the need for further research to attend to the impact of helpers acting in congruence with their values and helping contexts. Psychotherapists, or helpers in general, who intervene with clients using strategies consistent with their own values, may feel more hopeful in the psychotherapeutic encounter. This previously unexplored connection between helper congruency and hope is a worthwhile area of empirical investigation.

**Establishing boundaries and self-care.** Youth workers identified that caring for themselves or setting personal boundaries bolstered their experience of hope. Youth work is a difficult profession requiring significant personal investment. The youth workers identified that hope was encouraged when they were able to set personal boundaries between work and personal life, acknowledge the stress of the occupation, and engage in self-care activities.

In a prominent review of hope literature, hope was positively related to preventative health behaviors as well as optimal psychological functioning (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Some authors have found positive correlations between hope and the ability to engage in self-care

practices (Canty-Mitchell, 2001). The connection between hope and self-care has not been explored in-depth. In their conceptualization of hope as a multi-dimensional life force, Dufault and Martocchio (1985) characterized hopeful behaviors as actions focused on maintenance and nourishment of physical well-being. Nurturing or caring for the self, setting boundaries, and acknowledging stress could function to help the worker ‘ground’ themselves moving forward, re-connect to their work, and seek help in dealing with chronic stress or feelings of burnout.

### **The Hopeful Work Atmosphere**

Asking youth workers about hope elicited conversations about their work context. Youth workers identified several contextual factors, which influenced their experience of hope at work. In Dufault and Martocchio’s (1985) conceptualization of hope, the contextual dimension related to “those life situations that surround, influence and are a part of persons’ hope... the contexts serve as the circumstances that occasion hope, the opportunity for the hoping process to be activated or as a situations for testing hope” (p. 388). Some of the important contextual circumstances of the worksite, as described by the youth workers, seemed to occasion hope and sustain hope in their work with at risk young people.

**Circles of hope.** Youth workers identified the circle process as one of the hopeful contextual factors in their work. The youth workers described that sharing therapeutic responsibility, experiencing shared hope with others in the group, and offering consistency to youth was a part of their hope. Shared therapeutic responsibility between client and therapist has been linked to hope in empirical research. In Larsen, Stege, and Flesaker’s (2013) study examining psychologists’ in-session experiences of hope, the researchers found that hope was bolstered when the psychologist felt he or she shared therapeutic responsibility with the client.

The youth workers shared that the circle process, and the cohesion and togetherness that it created, facilitated meaningful therapeutic interactions and connections between youth. When this occurred, the workers expressed that they experienced a sense of shared hope with youth. The group also offered the clients an opportunity to connect and deepen relationships, which from the youth workers' perspectives seemed to develop a shared sense of hope among all group members. This finding is consistent with the group psychotherapy literature, which consistently highlights hope as an important group process affecting group outcomes (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; Yalom, 2008). The exploration of hope from the perspectives of group leaders remains a valuable area of future empirical inquiry, a notion supported by leading group therapy authors such as Corey et al. (2014) who suggest that it is fundamental for a group leader to stay hopeful for change in group therapy.

**A youth-friendly environment.** Maintaining an open and caring organizational environment for program alumni and current participants was important to youth worker hope. Having an open, inclusive space for youth offered the workers an opportunity to participate in the lives of alumni youth and celebrate their successes. This supported youth worker hope and offered transcendence and respite from their current struggles with challenging youth.

When the youth returned to share their successes or improvements, this provided the youth workers with feelings of transcendence and hope. Institutionalized events such as graduation ceremonies also helped the youth workers celebrate with the youth, highlighted the successes experienced by youth, and provided the youth workers with a feeling of empathic joy or other-oriented hope.

Few authors in the area of positive psychology have highlighted aspects of hope similar to the phenomenon these workers described. Howell and Larsen (2015), in their review of the

concept of other-oriented hope, highlighted the similarity between other-oriented hope and empathic joy. Empathic joy or positive empathy is defined as feeling “an expression of happiness or joy that results from comprehending another person’s positive emotional state or condition” (Sallquist et al., 2009, p. 223). Empathic joy is similar to other-oriented hope in the sense that one empathizes with the positive state of another person. According to Howell and Larsen (2015), these two concepts differ in their temporal orientation. Whereas empathic joy occurs in the present moment in response to another person’s current emotional state, the experience of other-oriented hope focuses upon the future welfare of another person (Howell & Larsen, 2015). The workers appeared to experience a mix of both of these phenomena. The workers experienced empathic joy for the successes and positive states of the youth, but also experienced on-going expression and investment of other-oriented hope when the youth were present in the building.

The prospect of clients returning to make helpers aware of their positive life changes could be an experience that enhances helper hope. These practice phenomena should be explored further in the helping literature, especially the experience of counsellors, social workers, and youth workers coming into contact with past clients who have been successful. It would be fruitful to investigate the effect this might have on the well-being, motivation, and hope of helpers in the field.

**Positivity and humor.** Most of the workers highlighted that the environment of this agency was positive and that they utilized humor in their work. Sustaining a sense of humor in the work environment provided the workers with feelings of hope in the face of the events they were coping with throughout the day. The workers also reported feeling as if their hope was bolstered by the positivity of the work environment, which helped them feel supported, engaged, and hopeful for their clients.

Given that positive psychological research has continually connected the experience of positive emotions with a myriad of benefits, the experience of positivity and support at work may provide youth workers with feelings of hopefulness. Research has found that the experience of positive emotions may serve to broaden one's thought-action repertoire, improve problem solving, provide an increased likelihood for emotional well-being in the future, and help counteract negative symptoms of mental health issues like depression (Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Work contexts that induce and encourage positive emotional experiencing may broaden thought-action repertoires related to the hoping process. Further, Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, and Tugade (2000) concluded that experiencing positive emotions can unravel negative emotions or lessen the physiological and psychological impact of negative emotions. An important implication for youth work could be that maintaining a positive work atmosphere fosters youth worker hope and serves to restore hope during times where youth workers feel their hope wavering. Future research should explore the connection between positive emotional experiencing and feelings of hopefulness in challenging workplace contexts.

Humor has been connected to hope in empirical research. In their qualitative exploration of hope-fostering strategies in psychotherapy, Larsen and Stege (2010) highlighted humor as a method counsellors employ in an effort to shift the client's perspectives on negative events or to challenge distorted thinking patterns. Harris and Larsen (2008), in their qualitative exploration of hope in peer counsellors, also identified that humor was a resource used to stay hopeful in the face of distress. O'Hara (2013), in his comprehensive review of hope and psychotherapy research, highlighted that humor served as an opportunity for individuals to review their presenting problem and modify their perceptions regarding the issue. O'Hara (2013) also

highlighted that humor serves as a grounding mechanism, allowing individuals to feel that their problems are a normal part of life and provide individuals with an opportunity to release stress and transcend struggle. Quantitative studies have also drawn attention to the role of humor in increasing feelings of hopefulness. In a study examining the effect of humor on hope, Vilaythong, Arnau, Rosen, and Mascaro (2003) found that individuals exposed to humorous stimuli experienced increased hopefulness compared to a control group shown neutral stimuli.

Youth workers engaging with at-risk youth may welcome humor in order to help them cope with difficult situations, transcend struggles, and instill feelings of hopefulness during times of stress at work. Encouraging humor that is respectful and focused on alleviating distress could be a part of encouraging hopefulness in the work environment. Future psychological research should examine the connection between humor and hope in various work environments.

**Feelings of community and hope.** The youth workers identified that feelings of community supported their hope at work. Some of the youth workers commented on the genuine, caring social engagement that occurred at work and others described the structure of equality at work between managers and staff.

Feelings of community and inclusion as well as the promotion of equality have been explored in previous literature on hope. Dufault and Martocchio (1985), for example, identified the affiliative dimension of hope as the social interaction and engagement with others that fosters hope in one's life. O'Hara (2013) referred to social engagement as a "stimulator of hope" (p. 117). He draws attention to the power of social engagement strategies to refresh one's experience and re-invigorate one to move forward and look outwards. Landeen and colleagues (1996) conducted a qualitative study, which gives support to this claim. In their study on workers engaging individuals with schizophrenia, they found that employees' hope was

supported during times when they were able to feel a sense of community at work, while engaging in projects with teams and learning about what other programs were doing at work (Landeem et al., 1996). The youth workers offered a similar explanation. They identified that hope was supported at work when they were able to connect with others in the agency through staff meetings and learn about the successful aspects of other programs. Further, youth workers expressed that isolation and exclusion at work were barriers to their experience of hope. In her exploration of caregivers of the physically ill, Herth (1993) found that feelings of isolation elicited feelings of hopelessness and despair. In a hermeneutic phenomenological exploration of compassion fatigue in health-care contexts, hope was seen as a protective mechanism (Austin et al., 2013). In their discussion regarding the role of hope in health professionals' experiences of compassion fatigue, Austin and colleagues (2013) concluded, "being part of a community can offer a profound source of hope" (p. 166). In addition, they concluded that hope was found in the presence and care of others. Austin and colleagues' (2013) findings parallel the conclusion found in the present study that sense of community bolsters worker hope.

This connection between hope and social support could be accounted for by considering that the support of others may buffer the negative effects of stressful circumstances at work. Workers who feel supported at work and part of a community may feel as if they can envision futures where they are supported to reach goals and experience positive growth. Studies that examine the relationship between feelings of hope and social support should be pursued to substantiate the claim that community and inclusion at work can bolster hope.

The second aspect of this theme, equality, related to the youth workers' experiences of feeling dignified and hopeful because of the lack of social stratification at work. Instead of managers and employees being separated by status, they often worked together which seemed to

support hope in the youth workers. In a paper exploring the experience of hope for social workers, Koenig and Spano (2007) cited recommendations from Rapp (1998) highlighting the need to invert traditional organizational hierarchies with clients at the top, employees in the middle, and management at the bottom. Rapp (1998) as cited in Koenig & Spano (2007) indicated that inverting these hierarchies and placing the needs of clients and employees as the highest priority has the effect of boosting hope for those involved in the agency. A worthwhile area of empirical investigation in the future might focus the connection between hope and perceived equality at work.

**Supported flexibility and innovation.** Most of the youth workers described that they were supported by their agency to engage in flexible decision-making and creative therapeutic engagement with youth. Youth workers communicated that they appreciated their agency offering them a safe space to practice creatively, take risks, and employ their own judgment in therapeutic decision-making. Instead of fostering rigidity in practice with concrete rules, youth workers were able to use techniques that fit with the youths' needs. The youth workers stated that this was a significant part of their experiences of hope at work. They also indicated that being employed at an organization that openly asked for their opinions and were open to changes supported hope.

There have only been a few connections between creativity, flexibility, and hope at work. Christy Simpson, a Canadian researcher in bioethics, provided a comprehensive description of hope in the healthcare context. Simpson (2004) listed creativity as an essential, and somewhat overlooked, aspect of hope. Parse and colleagues' (1999) qualitative exploration of the lived experience of hope for workers engaging homeless youth found a theme that is in alignment with the results in this study. As an aspect of Parse and colleagues' (1999) study, they explored hope



from the perspective of front-line professionals engaging homeless youth. Participants in the study identified that hope was facilitated by something called “inventive endeavoring” (p. 346), which meant that the individuals felt they could move forward with creativeness and innovation in their work. There have been some theorists who promote this type of inventive endeavoring through organizational policies and structures. Rapp (1998), as cited in Koenig and Spano (2007), stated that agencies that foster positive, strength-based, and flexible approaches to management are best suited to support worker hope and facilitate positive client outcomes. The characteristics of agencies that are able to achieve this are management teams in which “new learning, risk taking and experimentation in service of clients achieving their outcomes become the norms that guide practice” (Koenig & Spano, 2007, p. 56). These norms were evident in the operation of this particular agency with some workers referring to the organizational attitude of ‘pushing the envelope’ and trying new strategies with respect to engaging youth and promoting outcomes.

Another aspect of this theme was how the youth workers, being valued for their opinions, felt that their expertise, ability, and competence were respected. This seemed to be in alignment with findings from Larsen and colleagues’ (2013) examination of psychotherapist hope. Psychotherapists reported that if felt they were competent, able to do their jobs effectively, and perceived themselves as providing an advanced level of care to their clients, they felt their hope was supported (Larsen et al., 2013). This area of research could be further explored in the industrial-organizational psychological literature in order to find additional connections between autonomy at work and feelings of hope.

### **Hopeful Perspectives**

The youth workers communicated that they felt sustained hope through fostering positive

perspectives at work. Specifically, the youth workers in this study articulated that maintaining certain cognitive orientations was important to their experiences of hope. This theme was similar to Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) cognitive dimension of hope. In Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) articulation of the cognitive dimension of hope, they stated that hope can be dependent "upon the hoping person's perception of the situation, the time of reality considerations, and the extent in which, as well as manner in which, persons examine and assess reality in relation to the desired object" (p. 384). There is consensus in the literature that shifts in cognitive orientations about events or circumstances can influence hope (Flesaker & Larsen, 2012; Harris & Larsen, 2008; Herth, 1993; Larsen & Stege, 2010).

**Planting seeds of change.** Youth workers described part of their job as planting seeds of change in a youth's life. The workers recognized that the seeds they planted (seeds representing ideas, skills, or resources) might not be used by youth immediately. The workers communicated that this seed planting perspective helped them maintain hope in the face of challenging circumstances. Some of the youth workers connected with the idea that change cannot happen immediately, but will occur in the context of a larger adventure in which the youth is involved. Youth workers stated they understood change as a long, dynamic, and complex process. This orientation was supportive of hope because workers were able to envision a future in which the youth worker's teachings, skills, and resources were utilized by youth. This orientation served as a way for workers to conceptualize their role as a small part of a larger life narrative for youth.

There have been a few authors in the area of hope research who have drawn attention to similar orientations or perceptions of the change process. Namely, Flesaker and Larsen (2010) drew attention to their participants' (corrections reintegration counsellors) conceptualization of "life as a journey" (p. 62). Within this orientation, participants saw that their journey with clients

was a part of a larger path upon which the worker would be a fellow traveller. Setbacks and struggles were encountered in the context of the larger picture of life in which both the worker and client were engaged in a continuing process of growth and movement (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010). In another study exploring psychotherapist hope, Larsen, Stege, and Flesaker (2013) found that thoughts about possibilities or directions to move therapeutically with clients had an influence on psychotherapist hope. Perhaps youth workers similarly understood that they could move forward with the youth in a variety of ways and perceived that they could be helpful in a number of ways. In Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) conceptualization of hope, the temporal dimension contained a description relevant to this theme. The authors stated that keeping hopes non-time specific had a buffering effect and protected hope. Dufault and Martocchio (1985) asserted that non-time-specific hopes could "expand the possible, extend opportunities for positively affecting the hope and delay the need for further reality surveillance" (p. 387).

Perhaps hope was supported for youth workers when they understood their job was to plant seeds for the future instead of fostering immediate and timely therapeutic change. Perspectives or attitudes about change held by professional helpers should be explored in further research to investigate those that aid in sustaining hope. From research exploring common factors in psychotherapeutic outcomes, we know that therapist factors contribute significantly to outcomes (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Developing an in depth understanding of the cognitive orientations that contribute significantly to therapist hope may be an important area of empirical inquiry to further unpack the beliefs and ways of being that contribute to positive outcomes.

**Humanizing stories.** The workers described that labeling the youth was considered a barrier to hope. Conversely, humanizing the youth through allowing them to tell his or her story and continuing the storytelling process was part of a hopeful orientation. The workers described

that viewing the youth through a ‘human’ lens instead of a ‘pathologizing’ or ‘outcome-focused’ lens was a hopeful experience. Offering opportunities for staff and clients to tell their stories in work contexts as opposed to solely discussing outcomes could provide workers with hopeful windows through which to understand youth behaviors. Landeen et al. (1996) described a similarly hopeful aspect of work with individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia. The participants in the study identified that “[f]inding the person underneath the illness” (Landeen et al., 1996, p. 462), or recognizing that people were not defined by their illness or struggle, facilitated hope in their work. In terms of the youth workers in my study, they strove to look at youth through a human lens by listening to their stories. Harris and Larsen (2008) also found that sharing and listening to stories of triumph and success of others could transmit and foster hope.

Sharing hopeful stories of youth success in work environments could provide workers with hopeful feelings in their work. Perhaps further research could explore how helpers view their clients. Indeed, some theorists in psychotherapy literature assert that a helper must hold unconditional positive regard for their clients with the understanding that this will facilitate meaningful change (Rogers, 1957). De-pathologizing clients and viewing them as human beings first and foremost is considered important from the perspective of a humanistic therapist, but further research could explore if holding this particular belief or assumption is connected to hope for helpers. Examining these types of therapist factors and better understanding how they affect therapeutic outcomes could be important for the profession of psychotherapy and other helping professions.

**Purposeful work.** Youth workers communicated that they felt hopeful when they perceived their work as imbued with purpose. This theme related to the youth workers’ understanding of their work having an impact, not only on the youth, but also on the

organization, society, and the larger global community as well. One worker communicated that he felt that his work was an objectively 'good' moral task and connected this understanding to his sense of hope at work. Some of the workers mentioned that they experienced their job as a calling. Hope at work was experienced in part because the youth workers held the perspective that there was inherent purpose to the work they were carrying out.

There have been numerous research studies linking hope to one's experience of meaning and purpose. Some qualitative studies have drawn a connection between hope and meaning. In some studies, meaning is seen as a part of the hope experience for individuals (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010; Harris & Larsen, 2008). Quantitative studies examining the relationship between hope and meaning have found that hope can be understood as an aspect of meaning (e.g. Feldman & Snyder, 2005). Additionally, in a sample of undergraduate students, hope has been shown to mediate the relationship between a perceived higher calling to a particular field and satisfaction academically (Duffy, Allen, & Dik, 2010). Thus, the idea that hope has a connection to meaning has been explored both qualitatively and quantitatively in the literature. Further, some hope theorists such as Benzein and colleagues (2000) have posited that meaning is a foundational part of hope. In a qualitative study of healthcare workers, Austin and colleagues (2013) found that worker hope was connected to a deeply held sense of purpose and identity underlying healthcare work. One particular aspect of this study explored the deeply held existential hopes that workers experienced, especially in relation to their identity and purpose in life. Those in helping contexts identified that having a perceived 'calling' to the healthcare professions reflected their deeply held hope to reach out and helping others (Austin et al., 2013). From this exploration we can see that hope can be supported when an individual understands his or her vocation as fundamentally aligned with one's sense of purpose and identity.

A paper by Pargament (2013) offers an important addition to this discussion. In his exploration of the role of spirituality in mental health workers' experiences of hope at work, Pargament (2013) argued that discovering the sacred nature of mental health work and imbuing the work with a deeper sense of existential meaning can fuel hope at work. He stated that for theistic individuals, instilling work with the idea that a higher purpose can be found in serving God could foster hope. Pargament (2013) further asserted that this same effect on hope can be found with atheistic individuals who conceptualize their work as serving an existential purpose higher than themselves.

In terms of future research, helping professionals could be asked about how they make meaning or derive purpose from the work they do. I recommend further in-depth research exploration of connection between meaning and hope at work since it appears to be fundamental to the well-being of healthcare professionals and other helpers. The connection between a sense of purpose and hope at work should be explored both quantitatively and qualitatively in the literature.

**Focusing on the positive.** Maintaining a positive focus was related to youth workers' experiences of hope at work. As discussed by these youth workers, their ability to stay positive in the face of negative cultural images and conversations was integral to their experience of hope. Indeed, focusing on the positive was an essential component of moving forward therapeutically with youth. The ability for a youth worker to maintain hope and positivity was seen as essential to youth work practice. In relationship with youth, staying positive was central but it was also important in relation to fighting the negative societal perspectives regarding youth.

Previous authors have drawn attention to the idea that hope can be difficult to find in challenging professions and thus workers in these fields need to learn to seek hope and find

positivity at times when access to hope may not be obvious (Flesaker & Larsen, 2012). Flesaker and Larsen (2012) discussed maintaining hope as a seeking orientation motivated by the belief that hope is present, but needs to be uncovered. This is similar to the youth workers' conversations about positivity. Part of the youth workers' perceived task was maintaining a positive and hopeful orientation with an understanding of serious difficulties in their work.

In relation to further research, it would be worthwhile to explore how helpers can focus on what is positive in their work with difficult populations. Youth workers seemed to be communicating that maintaining a positive orientation was a 'common factor' of youth work or something that was at the center of effective youth work practice. The degree to which a committed positive cognitive orientation helps youth workers and other helpers to stay hopeful in their work with difficult clients could be a worthwhile area of investigation. This work would be especially important in the recent movement toward better understanding the factors that make helpers effective and ineffective (see Wampold & Imel, 2015).

### **Hope in Relationships**

Youth workers expressed that hope at work was experienced through building relationships with youth. All activities and outcomes that could be pursued in youth work were seen as secondary to the relationship. The workers honored a process-oriented programming structure as opposed to a content-focused framework. Paramount to this process-oriented understanding of youth work was the concept of meeting youth where they were. This meant beginning the working relationship from where the youth felt was important and comfortable. This also meant helping youth to heal in a way that was led by the youth exclusively.

The relationship was seen as the key ingredient to effective youth work and an important component to the experience of hope for the workers. There has been a considerable research

highlighting the importance of relationships to the experience of hope. Indeed, most qualitative studies focusing upon hope underscore the important connection between relationship and hope (Bishop & Willis, 2014; Koenig & Spano, 2007; Larsen, Stege, & Flesaker, 2013; Larsen & Stege, 2012; O'Hara, 2013).

**Establishing connection.** Some of the youth workers held the conviction that establishing and maintaining a meaningful connection with the youth was more important than any other outcome. It was through establishing a meaningful therapeutic relationship that experiences of hope were facilitated for these youth workers. The workers asserted that the content they taught youth was secondary to building and maintaining a strong bond with the youth. With the relationship understood as most important, progress in regard to this relationship was seen as hopeful movement regardless of how small this movement might be.

In Larsen and colleagues' (2013) study of psychotherapists, in-session experiences of hope were, in part, experienced both as a result of and through the relationship with the client. The relational connection between the therapist and client was seen as reason to be hopeful about the likelihood of a positive outcome as well as serving as a therapeutic end in itself (Larsen et al., 2013). Other studies have examined the role of therapeutic relationships in fostering client hope. Bishop and Willis (2014) explored hope from the perspectives of young people and found that youth saw hope as a relational concept. Participants in Bishop and Willis' (2014) study felt that relationships were facilitative of their experiences of hope and the absence of relationship were a damper upon hope. Similarly, in a study examining client experiences of hope in early counselling sessions, Larsen and Stege (2012) found that clients identified the therapeutic relationship as a both fundamental aspect of and precursor to hope in session. These authors concluded that the relationship is a fundamental aspect of hope. They also asserted that



counsellors hoping to build hope in clients should first look to using the therapeutic relationship as a tool in this process (Larsen & Stege, 2012). Perhaps the most assertive support of the connection between relationships and hope comes from O’Hara. In a grounded theory of hope for therapists, O’Hara (2013) sums up the connection between the therapeutic relationship and hope: “Relationships consistently factor as the central source and foundation of hope. When we welcome and embrace relationships we welcome and embrace hope. It is through the encouragement of others that we are able to hope [...] without the support of others there would be little hope” (p. 97).

There are a number of theories and empirical explorations of how hope may be fostered in relationship. Some authors posit that hope can be fostered through a warm, supportive, and secure experience of attachment (Allen, 2013). Others have specifically included attachment as an essential element of hope (Scioli, Ricci, Nyugen, & Scioli, 2011). Some authors believe that hope is fostered when a helper aids the client’s understanding of his or her presenting problem in a way that the client buys into and leads to meaningful action toward a desired change (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Future research should further unpack the connection between therapeutic relationships and hope in order that helpers can better understand how to build hopeful relationships.

**Starting ‘where they are at’: A youth-centered partnership.** Part of hope for these workers was letting youth lead the change process. Since youth work does not follow any manualized treatment protocol, moving forward therapeutically with high needs youth could be difficult. Attempting to configure a treatment plan or approach can be challenging. The youth workers expressed, however, that when youth workers met youth where they were at and the

youth led the process, this fostered hope because there was not as much responsibility on the worker to choose the direction of treatment.

This theme aligns well with Koenig and Spano's (2007) notion of flipping the organizational hierarchies of agencies serving at-risk populations. These authors propose that agencies should facilitate program changes and treatment plans based solely upon youth needs. Instead of managers making program decisions based upon political and bureaucratic circumstances, youth needs should be examined first and foremost. Youth workers or frontline professionals would ideally be in the middle of the organizational hierarchy, acting as a liaison for youth needs. This youth lead orientation toward youth work could perhaps be an important heuristic for supporting hope of practitioners working on the frontlines with challenging populations.

More research should be dedicated to clarifying how the structure of an organizational hierarchy affects employee hope. Since hope is important for human service professionals, it would be essential to study the hierarchical attributes of working environments that promote hope for frontline professionals engaging at-risk youth.

### **Socio-Cultural Factors**

The last constructed theme related to the socio-cultural factors that served as barriers to hope for youth workers. This theme contained a number of aspects including: negative cultural attitudes or messages, the socio-economic climate, collaboration with allied professionals, and funding. Only the aspects relevant to current literature are highlighted below.

The workers highlighted that youth being entrenched in personal, economic, or socially constricting circumstances were all barriers to hope. Some of these circumstances, such as homelessness, addictions, familial neglect or abuse, or severe mental health issues challenged

youth worker hope. Some of the workers explained feeling as if the systems in place to address them were not necessarily supporting the youth in a helpful way. This gave youth workers a sense of despair regarding their own ability to help youth. In his review of therapist hope, O'Hara (2013) described that external socio-economic conditions, those that affect clients intrapsychically, can be seen as a significant barrier to therapist hope. Similar to O'Hara's (2013) study, workers in this study shared that entrenched socio-cultural struggles that the youth face served as a barrier to hope for youth workers because of their perceived inability to affect change in the lives of youth.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

There are several implications arising from this study. These implications range from programmatic changes to clinical treatment insights for psychologists treating at-risk youth. The recommendations and limitations of this study will be discussed in succession.

**Program recommendations.** Policies and employment strategies should include a focus on hope-promotion for youth workers. Youth work is a profession fraught with difficulties. Employees in the field of youth work are often engaged in a difficult battle to stay hopeful at work. Shifting policy to support youth workers to feel motivated, engaged, and hopeful at work should be considered a priority. This section explores the implications and suggestions that stem from the findings in this study.

Recommendations stemming from the first theme of this study encourage program activities that foster authenticity and congruence in the workplace. As a youth worker, the ability to express oneself in an authentic and congruent way was seen as important to hope. Structured group activities aimed at fostering genuineness and authenticity could be important to youth worker hope. For example, it might be important to encourage workers to reflect on their

motivations, desires, and inclinations in relation to their work. Activities that facilitate genuine communication and expression of one's interests, values, and ideas at work can promote authenticity and maintain hope. Youth work is a difficult field and though professional boundaries at work are valuable to the maintenance of an ethical workplace, activities that encourage youth workers to express themselves authentically and connect with colleagues on a personal level may create more opportunities for workers to experience hope at work. Youth workers could also be encouraged to act in congruence with the values they are attempting to promote in their clients. Youth workers could be encouraged and actively supported to engage in similar activities to those encouraged in youth programming. For example, if youth workers emphasized using solution-focused language, then this might be reinforced in program staff meetings. Since congruence was a part of hope for these workers, these types of activities could potentially reinforce hope. Youth workers should be encouraged to 'walk their talk' or live their life in congruence with the values promoted in their daily engagement with clients. If one is acting in a way that is congruent with the implicit and explicit values they endorse as important in their work life, they may experience increased hope and well-being at work.

Evidence of the battle to improve self-care and boundary-setting practices is ubiquitous across professionally-focused academic journals. The findings from this study show that it could benefit youth workers to be encouraged to engage in self-care activities. Self-care, as suggested by workers in this study, could be approached as a cooperative endeavor whereby self-care is integrated into the workday through structured activities. In addition, encouraging workers to reflect on their own level of functioning and overall well-being could be important for the maintenance of their hope.

The second section of program recommendations draws from the hopeful atmosphere theme described by the youth workers in this study. The first constructed sub-theme was providing an open, friendly atmosphere for youth. One recommendation from this theme could be to create an atmosphere where youth can participate in the program on a long-term basis and build long-lasting, meaningful relationships with staff. It might be important for programs with high staff turnover to develop methods to purposefully involve youth workers in the process of celebrating youth success. This celebration of youth success would be beneficial both for the outcomes of youth and for the well-being of staff. Through the youth maintaining a positive relationship with the workers at the agency, they are supported in their lives and are provided with a safe-space to return to when their life becomes unmanageable. Programs should attempt to create an open and safe atmosphere to which youth can return upon completion of programming. Implementing this strategy can serve to support youth worker hope. This strategy also has the potential to improve outcomes associated with youth work relationships because productive youth work relationships are often long-term (Dubois et al., 2011).

In regards to the sub-theme of positivity and humor in the hopeful work atmosphere, encouraging positive and/or humorous interactions in the work place may be challenging in such a demanding occupation. Organizations that provide workers with opportunities to be positive and engage in adaptive humor at work may be giving their workers a chance to transcend current struggles, connect with coworkers, and build hope. Helping workers to engage in intentional, positively-focused exercises could provide workers with an increased opportunity to derive pleasure from their work. For example, allotting time in meetings to have fun and encourage each other while providing an opportunity for workers to chat and unwind could be something managers and staff can incorporate into meetings. A positive and encouraging work atmosphere

paired with a solid foundation of humor to buffer negative experiences at work could help workers cope with stressors and bolster hope.

With regard to the sub-theme relating to community and hope, there are a few important recommendations. Firstly, organizations may benefit from creating opportunities for youth workers to experience a sense of community with their colleagues. These opportunities could take the form of employee retreats and team-building exercises, but could also be centered on community building contexts at work such as team building discussions and opportunities to get to know colleagues personally. In addition to feelings of community, it could be beneficial for employers to consider operating with a ‘flipped organizational hierarchy’ such as that suggested by Rapp (1998). Promoting this type of interaction among youth, workers, and management team members could encourage feelings of equality and fairness, which was a part of hope at work as noted by these workers.

An important theme in terms of program recommendations would be policies allowing for flexibility in youth work programming. Youth workers in this study stated that the flexibility they were afforded at work supported their hope. Youth presenting issues can be complex and multi-faceted. If youth workers are to work with youth to address these issues, they must be allotted considerable flexibility in their approach. Agencies should strive to provide workers with a wide breadth of strategies to choose from to engage youth. Supported flexibility was considered important to hope for these particular workers. To support hope in these and other professions, it may be important to allow workers flexibility in their approach. This flexibility would be especially important for those working with complex and challenging populations.

In regards to the theme of perspective and hope, there are a few recommendations that can be made at the program-level. Firstly, employees should be encouraged to conceptualize and

understand change as a complex, long-term phenomenon. Viewing change as a long, gradual process where the youth worker plays a small but pivotal role can encourage feelings of hope. Indeed, youth workers in this study commented on how viewing change from a wider lens and interpreting the instrumental role of the youth worker in this change process helped the workers to reconnect with hope. Using models such as Prochaska's stages of change model could be helpful in regards to helper hope. The authors of the stages of change model posit that change is a process that occurs in stages or phases. Movement through the various stages is largely dictated by client 'motivation' or 'readiness.' This model of change tends to de-pathologize the ambivalence associated with the change process and views change as a long-term process. Though this model has been applied primarily to formal psychotherapeutic settings, the stage of change model was derived to inform any type of change process including self-motivated change (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1995). The stages of change model can be used as a valuable heuristic for understanding youth change processes; as found in my research interviews with youth workers, these models can serve to bolster hope and increase motivation in those working with youth as well. Youth workers, or other professionals engaging youth, could benefit from viewing client change through the lens of a model such as the stages of change.

Humanizing stories were part of an important theme that the youth workers identified as an aspect of hope at work. There are some straightforward recommendations that can be made based on this agency's practices of eliciting stories from youth. Agencies that encourage youth to tell their stories may be supporting youth worker hope. Allowing the youth to tell their stories helps the youth to battle against or defy the negative effects of labeling through making their stories of struggle and triumph explicit. This humanizing process can encourage hope in their workers as well. Negative societal labels that encourage blame were considered barriers to youth

worker hope in this study. Helping youth to tell their stories, whether this is facilitated through in-depth interviewing processes, video narrative storytelling exercises, or blogging may help youth to reconnect with the empowering narratives in their lives. This process may also encourage workers to feel more hopeful in their ability to build compassionate and individualized ways of helping youth. It may also contribute to the workers ability to form a meaningful and therapeutic relationship with the young person.

Another recommendation derived from the findings is that managers could encourage youth workers to explore the meaning they derive from the field of youth work. Participants in this study, and those in other research studies, suggested that deriving purpose or meaning from a secular or non-secular event can imbue one's life with hope. Viktor Frankl (1963) focused on this idea stating that in order for individuals to maintain hope during times of struggle, they must find meaning in their struggle. Exercises that encourage youth workers to discover the meaning they derive from working with at-risk youth could help workers to persevere during difficult times and maintain hope in the face of struggles. For example, employers facilitating sharing circles or employee retreats that explore the personal significance of pursuing a career youth work could function as a mechanism by which hope can be fostered at work.

The tendency for youth workers to engage in positive thinking or maintaining a positive orientation was an important aspect of their hope at work. In terms of the implications of this theme, the sustaining of a positive orientation could be encouraged by organizations as an important aspect of youth work. The youth workers in this study described that media conceptualizations of at-risk youth are often negative and pathologizing. Youth workers are commonly tasked with maintaining a positive focus while battling a negative cultural milieu. Positive and hope focused conversations that examine the uplifting aspects of the work may be a



fruitful avenue of exploration and potential implementation for organizations. Some of the youth workers mentioned that they would often debrief the negative aspects of the work but would spend less time focused on positive aspects of the work in a structured way. Facilitating worker debriefing sessions in a hope-focused way could foster feelings of positivity and while acknowledging the very serious difficulties faced on a daily basis.

The last recommendation that can be drawn from this work involves the importance of social activism to hope in the profession of youth work. The workers in this study identified a number of barriers in the socio-political context in which they worked. They stated that in their work, they often had to battle against deeply held socio-cultural beliefs about marginalized or 'at-risk' youth and this made it difficult to maintain hope. The workers described a substantive social justice component to their work. This was considered a ubiquitous part of being a youth worker and perhaps one of the more difficult aspects. Indeed, promoting social change can be challenging. Yet this process seemed to be essential to youth worker hope. It may be beneficial for agencies to support and facilitate social activism especially with respect to youth issues. Being able to affect change at a sociocultural level seemed to be a part of hope for the workers. Conversely, feeling unable to affect social change was seen as a barrier to hope.

The field of youth work could serve an important role in the advancement of clinical practice in fields such as social work and psychotherapy. The practical wisdom possessed by youth workers is under-utilized and could be said to contain important practical insight into the experience of helping another person. Studying other helping professions can foster important recommendations for psychotherapists. In the field of psychotherapy specifically, developing an in-depth understanding of the struggles and hopes of another profession can offer an intimate

look into what it means to be a helper and the ways the helping professions can be bolstered in their effectiveness.

### **Areas of Future Research**

This study served to communicate the factors that bear upon youth workers experience of hope in their work. Ideally, future research would explore experiences of hope for youth at-risk. Identifying factors in youth's lives that bear upon hope, especially youth involved in social programming and engaging with youth workers, should be explored using qualitative methodologies as no such research has been done. Additionally, the role of hope in the workplace—especially workplaces concerned with helping others—would be an important part of future research. This research might serve to ignite change in the way we structure service provision to this population, but also serve to communicate the ways that we can better engage and support those in this field. In addition, this research could invite other researchers to develop ways to measure workplace hope for those in the helping professions. Using qualitative studies to construct scales to measure workplace hope would give researchers and policy makers an opportunity to measure and support hope in specific helping contexts. In light of expanding future areas of research, it is important to consider the implications of the study while considering the limitations of the study.

### **Limitations**

It is important to consider the limitations of this study in a systematic and forthright manner. I will explore the limitations of my study in alignment with the publishability criteria set forth by Elliott and colleagues (1999). Concerning the criteria of owning one's perspective, grounding in examples, coherence, accomplishment of research tasks and resonance, my study aligns well with the criteria (Elliott et al., 1999). Examining my study critically in terms of these

criteria provided two main limitations to my study: (a) situating the sample and (b) providing credibility checks (Elliott et al., 1999).

One of the main criticisms of this study could be made in relation to the second criteria set forth by Elliott and colleagues (1999), situating the sample. In the data collection phase of my study, I did not collect sufficient demographic information about the sample. This led to a relative lack in descriptive detail about my participants. This presents a limitation in my study because it brings into question the homogeneity of my sample. My lack of specificity concerning the sample was intentional to protect the identities of my participants from those in their work place. Although the data was anonymized, the intimate nature of the workplace and the small sample size could have made it possible that the identities of those in the sample were unintentionally revealed. Those employed at the agency may have been interested to read my thesis. If I provided the reader with too much detail concerning the sample I may have implicitly revealed the identities of those interviewed. In future qualitative research in this area, it would be important to gather basic demographic data from the sample and present it generally in the relevant sections such that the anonymity of the sample is protected but the reader can become acquainted with the participants in a meaningful way.

In line with the fourth criteria set forth by Elliott and colleagues (1999), my study could have benefited from more extensive credibility checking. Although I was able to engage in member checks at the end of the coding stage and utilize my supervisor to audit my analysis process, the rigor of my study would be improved if it included additional member checking opportunities and additional qualitative methods or approaches. Concerning credibility checking, a practical limitation was the degree to which the youth workers could realistically spend time engaging in the member-checking phase of this study. Though I did provide the participants with

opportunities to check over their data independently, to improve my study, I might have conducted a few additional interviews with the workers to debrief the qualitative findings as well as to encourage them to expand on some of the ideas they expressed. Another suggestion by Elliott and colleagues, aimed at improving credibility, is to use a number of qualitative perspectives or methods. In my study, I could have included an observational case-study component to data collection when I was volunteering with the agency. Intentionally recording my observations of the time I spent at the agency may have provided my findings with deeper meaning and nuance. Although I spent time at the agency, the culture of the organization was very active and my time was often spent immersed in activities or conversing with youth. For the future, I would have included time at the end of each day to record my observations and provide reflections on my time with the organization. This would have provided additional data for crystallization in the study and it would have added additional nuance and credibility to the findings.

## **Conclusion**

This study focused on experiences of hope for youth workers engaging at-risk youth at an inner-city employment and education agency in a large Western-Canadian city. Youth workers communicated that hope was experienced through their sense of self, bolstered by the environment in which they worked, nurtured through maintaining certain perspectives, and supported through relationship building. In addition, the youth workers identified a number of sociocultural barriers that impeded their experience of hope. This chapter served to re-conceptualize the findings of this study in terms of their theoretical and empirical implications, as well as consider the implications of this study for those in the helping professions. Additionally, this chapter focused on the exploration of future research directions.

Through better understanding the experience of hope for youth workers and connecting this to current academic literature, my hope is that this study will serve to open the lines of communication between the academic helping professions and youth workers. Both fields have much to learn from one another. I believe that youth workers are deeply humanistic, client-centered, and hopeful professionals faced with a very difficult daily work life. My intention is that my findings will serve to inform policy changes, management practices, and research initiatives to support hope for the workers assisting at-risk young people through the tumultuous developmental transition of adolescence.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-structured interview questions

1. What is it like for you to work with the youth in your program?
2. Can you tell me a story that reminds you of hope in your work?
3. If you could imagine we were trying to look for hope in your work, can you tell me a little bit about where we might find it?
4. What are some of the things that help sustain your hope at work?
5. Can you tell me about some of the barriers you face with regard to hope in your work?
6. Tell me about your work atmosphere/environment and how this might relate to hope in your work?
7. Tell me what hope means from your perspective
8. Tell me a story about when your hope was challenged in your work?
9. Who do you hope to become in your work with youth?

**Table 1. Categories and Themes**

Experience of Hope for Youth Workers

The Self and Hope

- Being Real: Authenticity, Genuineness & Honesty
- Walking the Talk
- Establishing Boundaries

The Hopeful Atmosphere of Hope

- Circles of Hope
- A Youth-Friendly Environment
- Positivity & Humor
- Community, Inclusion & Solidarity
- Supported Flexibility & Openness to Innovation

Hopeful Perspectives

- Planting Seeds: Broad & Long Term Conceptualizations of Change
- Humanizing Stories
- Purposeful Work
- A Hopeful Focus

Hope in Relationships

- Establishing Connection
- ‘Starting where they are at’: Youth Centered Partnerships

Socio-Cultural Factors

## **Informed Consent**

**Name of project:** Experiences of Hope for Youth Workers Engaging At-Risk Youth in an Employment and Educational Outreach Program in Edmonton, Alberta

### **Research Investigator:**

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### **Background:**

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and understandings of hope in the work contexts of youth workers engaging at risk youth. The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis in the Department of Educational Psychology as a requirement of a Masters of Education in Counselling Psychology. The results of this study will also be catalogued in an electronic database for theses and dissertations at the University of Alberta.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences, roles, and understandings of hope from the perspectives of youth workers engaging at-risk youth at (agency) in Edmonton, Alberta.

### **Procedure:**

You will be asked to engage in a 1 on 1 interview with the research investigator regarding hope in your work. The first interviews will be approximately 1 - 1.5 hours in length. The interviews will be semi-structured and have approximately 7 – 10 questions. Though the interview has a script of questions, it will be fairly informal and resemble a guided exploratory discussion of hope in your workplace. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. After initial data analysis of the interview transcripts, I may contact you again for a second interview in order to check-in regarding observations about data or clarify key segments of the conversation.

### **Potential Benefit:**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. However, we hope that information from this study can help us to understand how youth workers understand and experience hope in order to provide information in terms of how to better support these individuals in their work. Information gained from this study can also be used to gain a better understanding of worker well-being as well as a unique look into the profession of youth work that has previously not been studied. No incentives are offered for participating and the research will be of no cost to the participant.

### **Potential Risk:**

Although there are no anticipated risks from participating in this research, conversations about hope can sometimes bring about feelings or memories of low hope. This can be temporarily distressing. It is important that you know that you may withdraw at any time and you may choose not to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable with answering. It is possible that there are risks to being in this study that are not known. If I learn anything during the study that could affect your willingness to continue with this study, I will tell you right away.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate in this research. You may also opt out of the study without penalty and your data will not be included in the study. The last available point at which you can withdraw from the study will be 30 days after the interview date.

**Confidentiality & Anonymity**

The data collected in this study are confidential. You will not be directly identified in this study at any point in the dissemination of these results. Pseudonyms will be used when appropriate in the research manuscript and all data are coded such that your name will not be stored with your interview transcripts. Key quotations may be used in the final manuscript but your name will not be attached in any way to these and any identifying information will be altered. The data will be stored on a password protected and encrypted computer. Any hard copies of the transcripts and personal information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within a locked research space. The principal researcher and the research supervisor are the only people with access to these data. The data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years. If you want access to the report of these research findings, contact the researcher or research supervisor at any time with the contact information provided above.

**Further information:**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Kenneth C. Murdoch or Denise Larsen. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Signatures:**

I have read the above description and understand the conditions of my participation. *My signature indicates that I agree to participate.*

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Researcher's Name: Kenneth C. Murdoch

Principal Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Supervisor's Name: Denise Larsen

Research Supervisor's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Information Letter to Participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Dr. Denise Larsen. I am a professor and researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. I am contacting you on behalf of Kenneth C. Murdoch, a volunteer at (agency) who you may know. Kenneth is completing his masters research under my supervision and he is interested in youth workers' experiences of hope in the context of their employment. I write specifically in the hope that you will seriously consider this invitation to participate in Kenneth's research.

We are contacting you specifically because this study is designed to understand the experiences of youth workers who engage with at-risk youth in their work. We hope to better understand your experiences and understandings of hope in the context of your work by interviewing you about this topic.

Participating in the study will take about 1 -2 hours for an in-person interview with Kenneth. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by Kenneth in preparation for data analysis. In addition, it could be that Kenneth would contact you to gather more information or clarify information with you after your first interview.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary; there are no direct incentives for participating and there are no penalties for declining. All the data will remain confidential and will be kept in a locked facility and on a password protected encrypted computer. The results of this study will be presented confidentially, meaning that no identifying information will be released. Finally, as part of the thesis, the results of this research may be presented or submitted to academic conferences and/or journals. This project is in partial fulfillment of Kenneth's masters thesis project through the Faculty of Education.

If you are interested in learning more or wish to participate in this study please contact Dr. Denise Larsen at [denise.larsen@ualberta.ca](mailto:denise.larsen@ualberta.ca). With your permission, she will share your interest with Kenneth C. Murdoch and have him call you to learn more about this study and how you might participate in it.

If you have any additional questions, you can also contact either Kenneth C. Murdoch or Denise Larsen.

Kenneth C. Murdoch – [kcmurdoc@ualberta.ca](mailto:kcmurdoc@ualberta.ca)

Dr. Denise Larsen – [djlarsen@ualberta.ca](mailto:djlarsen@ualberta.ca)

Thank you so much for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Kenneth C. Murdoch & Denise Larsen