

colleen macquarrie
emily rutledge
lorraine begley

Wresting Change as a Liberating Concept:
Lessons Learned From Teen Moms in a
Liberation Psychology Workshop.

By Colleen MacQuarrie, Emily Rutledge, Lorraine Begley, University of Prince Edward Island

Abstract *Injustice is an historical process that requires sustained efforts to resist. Resistance to systems of oppression through liberatory processes that analyse, understand, and dismantle the conditions for our subjugation are central for critical marxist feminist theories and the praxis of liberation psychology which seeks to address change on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels of society. We reflect on the change processes within our 8 week project with 'teen moms' that utilized the theory and practices of liberation psychology to assess the development of a 'capacity for change.' Women identified shared oppressions, supported each other's analysis, and created a safe and strong group dynamic which they identified as empowering. Understanding resistances to change is explored as a central theme throughout the project and the catalytic value of unpacking the concept of change for/with traditionally marginalized populations is explored.*

Creating moments of transformation among traditionally marginalized populations is a cornerstone in social justice movements around the world. Inherent in Marxist socialism is a theory of alternatives that conceptualize injustice as a historical process which is created by humanity and can therefore be changed by humanity. As an existentialist, Marx's writing offers a protest against the historical epoch of Western industrialization with its concomitant alienation, loss of personhood and transformation of the individual into an object. In Marx's Capital Volume 1, he details how economic structures oppress and alienate humans from themselves and from each other. His materialist method articulates how "It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their social being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p.362). Thus political and economic structures created by humans as historical moments also create conditions for our individual alienations; structures must be interrogated to understand our humanity and how to resist alienation. As for transformation, Marx is hopeful

that social revolutions are integral to humanity's consummate struggle with constraining structures. This conception of historical materialism relates to a renewed spiritual center for humanity that renders the unique pursuit of the individual as a key to our fully conscious existence and as a protest against false consciousness (Fromm, 1961).

Importantly, Marx's influence has been critically modified by feminist scholars to foreground liberation from gender oppression by Marxist feminists (i.e., Benston, 1969; Fox 1980), material feminists (i.e., Hennessy, 1993, 2000; Vogel 1995) and radical feminists (i.e., Haraway, 1985; Harding, 1986; Hartsock 1983 a,b; O'Brien, 1981; Smith, 1974) who also particularly emphasize the psychology of women and work (i.e., Chodorow, 1978, 1979, 1982; Kuhn & Wolpe, 1978; Mitchell, 1972, 1974; Ruddick, 1989). Radical approaches pioneered arguments about the intersectionality of oppressions to articulate how one's relation to the work of production and reproduction gave people at the

nexus of various identities a different way of knowing the social totality. An obvious connection for our work with teen mothers has been the linkage to radical feminist writings and liberation psychology (LP).

Liberation psychology originated in the latter half of the 20th century in the Latin Americas at a time marked by brutal dictatorships. Its' originator, psychologist and Roman Catholic priest Ignacio Martin-Baro, along with a dozen supporters were assassinated by the US backed fighters in El Salvador (Osorio, 2009, p. 17). Martin-Baro articulated a psychology of liberation whereby a people experiencing oppression identify, from dialogue among their peers, new clarity of political insight about their circumstances, tools of resistance to oppression, and liberation from the repression of the powerful elites. LP adds to Marxism a method of pursuing liberation as an ongoing dialogical process of group emancipation that stems from individual experiences of alienation. The multiple layers of oppression identified in LP align well with a Marxist socialist (Fromm, 1961) deconstruction and a radical feminist theorizing (Moane, 2011) of how political structures impact upon individual psyches and interpersonal relationships.

Central to LP is acknowledging that oppressions are multiple and intersecting, thereby creating limit situations (Moane, 2011) for individuals which are connected to group oppressions. The limit situation is not a deterministic standpoint but rather a constrained space of options. This is similar to the idea postulated by Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology* (1850), in writing about consciousness and how people's lived experiences influence their world views "...definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations...The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals...as they really are; ie as they are effective, produce materially, and are active under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will." (p.13, year). Thus the materialist conditions create limited spheres of action, awareness, and being. In LP, the populations experiencing oppressions participate in a negative spiral of disempowerment leading to increased alienation from others, isolation, and fragmentation of populations that may otherwise share an understanding of a common social solidarity. Countering these oppressive disempowering mechanisms is the positive cycle of transformation or liberation marked by an increased awareness, social identification of issues, and empowerment to challenge oppressions on personal, relational, and systemic levels. LP articulates a dynamic theory of oppression in counterpoint to liberation, identifying and opposing the structural oppressions within each historical context. While Marx believed that much of our consciousness is 'false' he nevertheless held forth that awareness was possible. LP details how awareness can be actualized through collective problematization of limit situations.

The implications of radical social theory in various contexts are not understood until diverse groups grapple with praxis and the fullness of history has provided perspective. To that end, we are interested in how liberation psychology (LP) might work with our pursuit of social justice in a small rural province in Canada. In the summer of 2009, we collaborated with four teen mothers to implement, assess, and redesign a LP workshop.

The transferability of the premises of LP to historical contexts outside of Latin America is evidenced by the work of Dr. Geraldine Moane of University College Dublin who utilizes the theory and practices of LP within the universe of post-colonial Ireland (Moane, 2009, 2011). The transferability from Ireland to a small rural province in Canada, Prince Edward Island (PEI), was examined through the work of two of the authors of this paper. We traveled to Ireland to study with Dr. Moane in February 2009. Five months later, with adaptations of Moane's work to a context relevant to teen mothers in PEI, University of Prince Edward Island ethics approval was obtained, and an eight week course in LP commenced. Previous longitudinal research with the teen mothers indicated that in PEI as elsewhere in North America, young mothers were at the nexus of a web of oppressions, creating limit situations. The intersecting oppressions, including but not constrained to gender, class, race, age, heteronormativity, marital status, and rurality, operate to undermine authority and voice in their lives (MacQuarrie, Begley, Preston, 2010). LP's transformative power over oppressions is braced against the power of community coherence to resist the dynamics of oppression. Liberation psychologists are clear that one of the ways to reverse the negative effects of oppression is to form a community among the oppressed persons; several projects have documented the beneficial aspects of collectively advocating to change oppressive situations (e.g., Watkins, M., & Shulman, H., 2008). The theory and practice of LP emerges from an oppressed community expressing the desire to change the status quo, and takes the position that an individual's psychology and their political environment are not only linked, but interactive. Therefore, not only can oppression have negative impacts on health; but resisting oppression and instigating political change can be an act of liberation, with positive psychological effects (e.g., Moane, 1999, 2011).

LP is often presented in the context of a preexisting resistance group or niche of resistance (Moane, 1999, 2011). However, the teen moms in this project had not formed as a group prior to this research, which means they had not naturally formed a group advocating for political change. As such this project works with a group of individuals who may share common oppressions, but have no preexisting rapport or organization to politically challenge those oppressions which are creating the limit situations (Moane, 2011) or material conditions for their lives (Marx & Engels, 1850). We were interested in understanding how a LP workshop might animate a previously disparate group to create transformative change on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels.

Methods

Using a participatory action research approach, our project took place over an eight week period, with one weekend-long launch session; three, three-hour evening sessions; and one day-long final session. Each participant was given a binder with some questionnaires, definitions pertaining to LP and a package by the World Health Organization about the Social Determinants of Health. The first weekend-long session included three workshops to engage the women with the model of LP. Throughout the pilot, the four women were encouraged to share and reflect on their stories, and the bulk of the project is group conversation on topics immediately pertinent to their lives. These shared stories and conversations were recorded, and amount to 25 hours of audio recorded data—the richest and most plentiful source of data generated by the pilot. Additionally, the women were asked to document what they would like to change in their lives and to keep journals where they could reflect on their learning and the process of the pilot. The last day long session included an artistic expression component where the participants were asked to create something from their experience of the pilot to pass along to the next group of participants.

The cornerstone for our analysis, methodical hermeneutics (Gergen, 1989; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Packer & Addison, 1989; Ricoeur, 1979, Rennie, 2007), is an inductive approach to understanding and interpreting people's experiences using constant comparative methods (e.g. Burnard, 1991; MacQuarrie, 2001; Pieranunzi, 1997). As such, it is well suited to illuminating workshop experiences and processes. Two of the authors modified Dr. Moane's work, collaborated with the teen moms, facilitated the weekend workshop and were immersed in the unfolding time line of the pilot and subsequent analytical process and dialogue with participants about the results. The other author participated as part of her Honours thesis in the analytical phase of the empirical materials and the communication of the analyses back to the participants.

The LP project sessions were guided by modules focusing on specific questions but they used a dialogical research conversation format (Herda, 1999) to encourage participants to authentically generate concerns and ideas from their perspectives. The participants spoke candidly; the form of their conversations was often anecdotal and direct to the topic at hand, sometimes somewhat related, and sometimes not at all related.

Constructing a Constitutive Theme

To systematize the analysis, we created a topography of the workshop audio recordings which initially used two hierarchies: 1) the least important material was conversation where the participants were not speaking at all on topic, 2) greater importance was dedicated to conversation where the participants were speaking on

topic; the scope of this category is large, and the topography is mainly dominated by this category of importance. Analysis of this material was our initial goal, however, in keeping with our openly interpretive dialectical approach we sought to understand the parts of the workshop in the context of the whole, interrogating our emergent understanding against contradictions and paradoxes. As such we paid careful attention to the parts of the workshop that went against our expectations. After considerable discussion, we decided some material in the least important 'off topic' category warranted further attention; specifically what we had categorized as "banter" often took the form of jokes, light-hearted teasing, and dramatic changes of subject. Conversations amongst the research analysis team troubled over why and when conversations were seemingly off topic; analysis honed in to examine what, if any, function was operating to the so called off topic conversations. It was through this process of categorizing off-topic conversation as "*banter*" that the theme of this paper, the problematics of the change concept was constructed. The remainder of this paper will focus on this constitutive theme for the empirical material.

Results and Discussion: The Problematics of Change

Using methodical hermeneutics we focus on the concept of change as being a problematic and misleading concept, with even more extreme difficulty for oppressed groups. We will describe and critique the concept of change as it was experienced in this LP project with teen mothers in a rural province in Canada. As Moane (1999, 2011) points out, political influence is not distributed equally in hierarchical systems. We extend this to argue that based on understanding how limit situations operate (Moane, 2011), one's capacity to change is similarly unevenly distributed with those at the bottom being more alienated from their power to effect change, a power that we all (theoretically) hold (Marx, 1844). This means that people with less relative power to effect change will imagine a smaller action universe than those with relatively more power; thus the idea that one is an agent to effect change in a substantial way is also connected with one's relative stance in relation to various limit situations or material conditions (Marx & Engels, 1850). The more constrained the limit situation in terms of the intersectionalities of oppressions the less likely one is to imagine the possibilities of change (Moane, 2011).

Within the first day of the workshop, mutual experiences of oppression were shared, and teen moms created a strong rapport of mutuality in their experiences of devaluation along gender, age, and class lines. Similarly while the group banded together, and identified with each other's analysis of each person's experiences of oppression. They also enjoyed being together and felt empowered by being in the group. The participants did not hesitate to share their experiences of oppressions that affected them in the past. To illustrate, this is a sample of flip chart data from the

pilot. Flip chart data are the empirical materials generated through group discussion and recorded on a flip chart as key points from this dialogical process:

WHAT MESSAGES AM I / ARE WE GETTING FROM SOCIETY ABOUT TEENAGE MOTHERS?

- We are a tragedy.
- We are sluts/trashy.
- We are a drain on society.
- We are nothing more than just another statistic.
- We can't be good, caring parents.
- We will have kids who will be problems and are not normal.
- We get no credit for having strength.
- It's okay for fathers to walk away, and if they stay they get praised.
- Judgments are made about your choices.
- We live in a paradox: If mom works she is not at home with kids. If she goes to school she is not at home with kids. If mom stays at home she is not at school.
- We are patronized by the phrase, "Babies having babies."

This list powerfully depicts the stigmas and oppressions adolescent mothers face as they undertake the unparalleled challenges of raising children. From their experiences, it seems that society fails to support these women, offering them instead judgment and blame. Despite the "unnatural" gathering of this group for a project on LP, they indeed formed a strong group dynamic, enjoyed and felt empowered by being in a group of people in similar situations, and felt respected and more likely to share these experiences with this particular group of people. In this way LP's building block of a community of oppressed was successfully created. This is an excerpt from the first evening session to illustrate the cohesive and supportive group dynamic:

Betty: It would be cool if we did a fire dance. I mean like after this is over. Every few months.

(Some conversation and excitement about where/when to do a fire dance)

Anna: Because I don't know if you guys realize how much this has changed our lives. It's changed our lives completely because it's given us somebody that... It's the only place in my entire life that has this.

Charlotte: The only place that you can actually talk about your life.

Betty: Yeah.

Kate: And people actually listen and have the same ideas... Well not the same ideas, but...

Charlotte: Nobody's judging.

Betty: Yeah.

Anna: So we're probably benefitting from this more than you guys are!

Researcher

Lorraine: Wow.

Researcher

Colleen: Perhaps it's a mutual learning.

In the above excerpt, each individual in the workshop was expressing the same idea of the empowering feelings invoked by being in the group, while finishing each other's sentences in doing so. The expressions of how fulfilling and rewarding it was to be at the meetings were not unusual, and dotted the conversations throughout the meetings. Through these meetings, the group created a safe place to talk about their experiences, and would use these anecdotes from their personal lives to analyze their experiences. The group often spoke of "here" being an important, positive and safe place, unlike the outside world, which they would refer to as "there".

Anna: I feel better here. Like not smaller. Important.

Betty: Here I feel like Betty. There [outside] I feel like a 19 year old mother who should be in school who shouldn't have kids.

While the group was able to create a strong community with new connections and empowered attitudes among themselves, they experienced difficulty incorporating these changes into their daily lives. Early on, the group identified some areas of their lives that they wished were different, many on the personal, some on the interpersonal and a few on the systemic levels. For example, from the intrapersonal level, women wanted to feel strong and confident to stand up for themselves in the face of discrimination; on an interpersonal level, women wanted to change male partners' attitudes toward childcare, housework, relationships; and systemically women wanted to change social stigmas associated with being a "teen mom."

However, there are real and present barriers for young mothers who are interested in instigating change. The lack of time a new mother experiences, compounded by the unequal distribution of childcare between parents is a major obstacle to influencing change in other areas. A lack of money has further debilitating effects to those who wish to instigate changes. Women in a heterosexual relationship in our society are more likely to be in a subordinate position to their male partner's dominant status (ie.,

Coontz, 2005; Friedan, 1963; Fox, 1980; Hennessy, 2003). This hierarchy may show itself as restricting the female partner even further from access to time, resources, privacy and freedom. These together with the already noted stigmas an adolescent mother experiences do not create an accessible and friendly society. These obstacles work in tandem with an internalized oppression (Martin-Baro, 1994; Moane, 1999; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005) or self perception of being less worthy or undeserving of equity. Here Anna links her stigma as being labelled a “teen mom” to her perceived ineffectiveness when dealing with a confrontation with a store clerk:

... when something like that happens ... I go back to being like, a teen mom, not good enough and all that stuff comes back ... Even though it has nothing to do with me being a teen mother but that's the feeling I guess I had... Yeah, things are inside of me anyway. They just start to come out as soon as I have that feeling that I might have had in one of those situations. I get the same feeling again and it all comes back and that's what I am...it doesn't take much to make me feel that way again.

Here Kate talks about her internalized oppression from being stigmatized as a “teen mom”:

I say that having my baby was “The best damn mistake I ever made” ... But that's not the way I feel. I say that to assure myself. When you hear it over and over how stupid you were for having a baby so young, you have to tell yourself something.

External obstacles to being agents of change like time and money are more easily identified, whereas internalized oppressions are elusive. We don't always recognize our negative self perceptions as an internalization of oppression that keeps the status quo in place. The relationship of our negative self perceptions to the social structure is one of viewing ourselves as others see us, of internalizing the gaze of the other. In Marxist terms, this is the ultimate result of the impact of social and political structures, that our being is fractured and formed by our relationship to the structure, that our psyche is formed by the prevailing socio-political organization. Thus internalized oppressions elucidate the contour of how we have been alienated by our social structures. This notion of internalized oppressions is aligned with Marx's concept of ‘false’ consciousness. That we do what we do, unaware of how what we do is formed and forecast by our position in the socio-political landscape, or by our social status/class.

During analysis of audio sessions, a pattern emerged that we recognized as an expression of internalized oppression. The pattern was one of participant's resistance to the concepts of change and resistance to engaging in a systemic analysis to locate the structural oppressions operating on experiences.

It was noted that when the subject of change, especially in terms of how to change one's life, was opened up to the group, the group often reacted by drastically changing the subject, and continuing on in this new direction which was wholly unrelated to the topic of change. This emerged most notably in the workshops following the initial, weekend-long workshop after the concepts behind LP were introduced. At the beginning of the first evening session it was demonstrated that all four women had a clear grasp of the conscientization cycle as each spoke about an attempted change in her life as a practice of LP. In this way the participants were aware of the theory of LP as being analogous to activating a process of change, and engaged with it accordingly. However, it seemed apparent that when the subject of change became a difficult topic, when an attempted change did not go as hoped, the group would deflect the conversation into banter. For example, in this excerpt from the first evening session, while each of the participants at first related stories of change relatively victoriously, Charlotte did not feel that her attempt at change was a success. The group acted by unanimously avoiding the topic of what to do when a change does not go as planned:

Charlotte: ... One of my things I wanted to change was to be more active, but, kinda hard to do when I was throwing up every morning (*laughs*), so... (*pause*). Kinda hard, and Will (other toddler) was sick all last week so it was kinda hard to be more active and get out. So...

Researcher
Colleen: But you tried to do something, and now, things happened, and you, the piece of the cycle is OK, what can I maybe change in that, um. So, you sort of reflected. You said my kid was sick and I was sick, and it's really hard to exercise when you're vomiting. [*Danielle makes a face*] Sorry, Danielle, you're eating. (*laughter*)

Betty: I eat and vomit (*laughter*).

Anna: Kinda looks like you're eating vomit. (*laughter*)

(*Laughter, Food banter*)

Researcher
Colleen: So Charlotte you started to talk about how um, how you were trying to make some changes...

(*group murmur and laughter and banter about footsies*)

Researcher
Lorraine: ... So as we move to change the situation that

we're in, um, we experience a sense of liberation. We've done something positive for ourselves, or for the group.

Anna: Anyone mind if I close this?

(Laughter. Banter about room organization and a piece of jewelry)

Where the change or conscientization cycle seemed to falter was when reaching the "taking action" stage. There also existed a reluctance to see their personal or shared experiences as an effect of greater political systems at play. Conversations on the topics of change or structural influences were repeatedly uprooted by drastic changes of subject, often followed and sustained by banter on an unrelated topic. In thinking about how this dynamic is more than just 'dross' or off topic, it was the holistic pattern of difference from the rest of an engaged research conversation (Herda, 1999) that marked them as indicative of what might be called resistances to consciousness (Moane, 2011) and indicative of alienation (Marx & Engels, 1850). For example, at each session, the women filled out a questionnaire on the subject of change, specifically what about their lives they would like to change, and how they plan to make these changes. These questions were presented to the participants at some point in every session. The reluctance to directly answering questions about how and when to exert change in one's life is obvious to the facilitator, given the way she presents the papers to the participants.

Researcher

Lorraine: Here are your stages of change papers, I know you're excited.

Betty: *(deep breathing-laugh)*

Charlotte: We have to do another one?

Some of the examples do not deal directly with the term "change", but instead, since the conscientization cycle has become analogous with change, group banter often derailed discussion around the conscientization cycle or the theory of liberation.

Researcher

Colleen: ...This week's challenge: Come up with another cycle of the conscientization cycle.

Anna: I like Mondays, more time to reflect.

(Banter about pregnancy, conception in stormy weather.)

The second evening session's conversation did not deal specifically with the subject of change, but instead was dominated by the topic of what expectations society puts upon women. The women

were actively¹ involved, collaborating with examples and stories of where they felt that they had been discriminated against, or where people had made wrong or hurtful assumptions. These examples were filled with direct, personal experiences of sexism and ageism, among other oppressions. However, when there was a call by the facilitators to look at what political or structural measures may be in place against them, the participants again acted as a group, and with the use of banter, detracted from a structural analysis. Again, the holistic pattern in the group discussion was one of engagement and then direct, immediate diversion from the topic that was emerging from women's experiences of anger and jealousy:

Anna: I'm pretty sure that the word slut or whore was never made up by a man.

Researcher

Colleen: Interesting. Who gains by horizontal oppression?

Charlotte: No one.

Anna: Nobody. At all.

Researcher

Colleen: Why is it there though? How is it functioning?

Anna: Because some women, or some people haven't been able to get ahead themselves and that makes them angry, and angry to see other people getting ahead without them, when they don't have the ability to do it. Maybe?

¹ The question of whether labeling actions/thoughts as internalized oppression is another way of propagating and entrenching those oppressions has been raised. One way to think about the concept is as an ideological tool for empowerment. The concept of internalized oppression is a resistance tool to excavate the insidious nature of alienation from self consciousness. Through questioning the socio-political structures as a collective, through questioning the ideologies of our historical period, oppressed groups can reframe dominant political discourses of their limit situations, and re-imagine a different present consciousness. The distinction is in the process of how internalized oppression is raised as a question for consideration rather than as an indictment of powerlessness. So to be part of the conversation about internalized oppression is a key factor in keeping this concept from becoming part of a contribution to oppression. Rather than seeing oneself as another's object, examining the idea of internalized oppression becomes a powerful tool in the hands of the oppressed. To keep internalized oppression from becoming an oppressive force, it's function as an ideological block on change needs to foreground the discussion; it's unexamined function is to maintain the status quo. By naming the process, one can be part of shifting the status quo.

- Researcher
Colleen: So the anger is directed at the same group.
- Anna: And then they feel badly about themselves. Yes, anger and jealousy I think is huge.
- Researcher
Colleen: Interesting to think about how that functions.
- Betty: This salad is perfect thank you.
- Researcher
Lorraine: Oh good (*laughs*)!

(*salad dressing banter*)

An oppressed person's dismissal of their ability to activate change in their life can also be seen as a form of internalized oppression. In a hierarchical system the ideology presented is that those in power are seen as naturally dominant and those in subordinate positions are deemed innately powerless (Moane, 1999, p. 27). Feminist psychologist Jean Baker Miller writes:

once a group is defined as inferior, the superior or dominant group judges them to be incapable of performing roles that the dominants value highly, and assigns them roles such as providing services which are poorly valued. The inferior capacities of the subordinates are seen as innate or natural. Stereotypes of the subordinates include 'submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think (Miller, 1986, p. 7).

In this way, dominants in a hierarchical culture would monopolize the roles of change-makers, and resist attitudes that would threaten these positions. Systemic blaming of the oppressed for their situations and stigmas are a powerful way to keep the status quo. Miller also writes "power is the ability to produce a change" (Miller, 1986, p. 10). Therefore, it would seem that effecting change is integral to being empowered. For oppressed people, who by definition lack power, there are many obstacles to producing change, not the least of which is the internalized belief that they are not able to do so. Moane writes:

Internalized oppression is a theme which recurs in writings on women, racism, colonialism, homophobia and heterosexism, and other experiences of oppression. It is associated with psychological patterns which include self-hatred, sense of inferiority, hopelessness and despair, mutual distrust and hostility, and psychological distress and madness. Internalized oppression is an obstacle to political activism, along with the obstacles posed by political and social forces (Moane, 1999, p. 20).

Indeed, the internalized avoidance to the idea of change poses a great difficulty for imagining change. How can one even start

to think about change in this context of internalized avoidance of the topic? But perhaps this perspective problematizes the participant's avoidance of the concept of change, which may be considered yet another form of oppression. Rather, an analysis of the participant's experience of the word change may be more helpful. For those who live in oppressive circumstances where change is very difficult, it makes sense to problematize the very concept of change. For example, participants spoke about times when the usage of the word 'change' was a weapon used against them; perhaps the concept of 'change' has become imbued with a sense of other's judgments, associated with their oppression, and may evoke internalized oppressive feelings of guilt and self blame. To illustrate, Charlotte speaks of the terrible experience of having her child taken away from her because she was judged by others to be unfit to be a parent. The resulting legal proceedings affirmed her parental rights after months of separation from her child. Interestingly, she speaks of the judge's accusatory use of the word 'change', and further relays her offended reaction: "The judge said, 'So you don't think you need to change?' and I was like 'Well yeah, but I don't need you guys.'"

For adolescent mothers whose societal stigma implies deep shame about decisions that they have made in the past, the very idea of instigating change to one's life may hold a personally offensive, judgmental, and accusatory ring. However, LP assumes that instigating change is integral to liberation, imbuing the concept with great meaning and power. Similarly, Miller equates instigating change with power, (which is reserved for dominants). Therefore, the concept of change for those who do not have access to it may understandably seem inaccessible, daunting, and overwhelming. Oppressed people who attempt change are also likely to blame themselves for their perceived failure. Here Anna speaks about the complex process of how to deal with discrimination, that in order to deal with a passing insult, one must be able to deal with it internally first:

If you sat there and told me, I don't know, some insult, I can walk by and not acknowledge it, but it doesn't mean that I didn't go home and cry. I just... I don't know if ignoring is the antidote. You have to learn something beyond that ignoring...like inside yourself. Or if I'm angry, it just festers, I have to let go of the anger to be empowered, ...So unless something changes inside of me to be able to cope with that instead of just ignoring it... but if I could truly learn to ignore something, it would be different...I guess that's what I'm saying, is that you would need to learn how to deal with it inside...

It is clear here that Anna does not see her anger as a tool, but rather as an impediment to change. Further she feels it is an impediment that is her responsibility alone. This suggests an important dynamic paradox between internalized oppression and a systemic analysis. Kasl, a researcher of internalized oppression and addiction claims that "transformation of addictive and other patterns requires understanding the link between these patterns

and hierarchical social organization” but warns “indeed failure to see this connection perpetuates self-blame and feelings of helplessness.” (Moane, 1999, p.92). For oppressed people who blame themselves for attempts at change that are not successful, change may not be worth the effort. Pragmatically then, being presented with questions of how to change one’s life becomes something to avoid.

Further, the word ‘change’ is often used in a misleading way especially in North America where it takes on a superficial binary that obscures the process behind it. Any examination of the phenomenon of change illustrates it does not happen instantly and it is difficult to say where it ends and begins. Our daily experiences will inevitably change us. However, the word as we know it suggests that our state of being has a duality; that one has changed or has not changed. This is especially problematic and overwhelming for those living at the bottom of a hierarchy whose self perceptions do not usually include ‘change agent’; who do not generally see themselves as possessing the power to make things different and whose limit situations constrain their actions to effect changes as easily as do those dominant in the hierarchy. There is evidence of such an analysis of the term change by the participants in the pilot. Early in the pilot the participants were asked to give examples of what they would like to change. Anna suggests an introductory step to this brainstorming process. Such a suggestion can be interpreted as a deconstruction of the term change:

- Researcher
Colleen: Taking action is what we’re talking about next. What are some things you might imagine changing based on your experiences? ... What would you want to change about yourself, and or your relationships, and or the system?
- Anna: Should we write about what isn’t fair about it first?
- Researcher
Colleen: Tell me more.
- Anna: Should we take a step in between to write down about what we just discussed? What’s not fair, not so much what we want to change but what’s not fair about it? And then maybe we can look at what we want to change.

This analysis is summarized well by Anna’s quote from the first evening session, she says simply “Change takes time”.

This critique of the mainstream misrepresentation of the term “change” is analogous to Miller’s critique of the meaning allotted to the word “power” in our society. Power is similarly seen as possessing a binary property: Moane summarizes Miller’s analy-

sis: “For liberation there will also be a need for reconceptualizing power and self-determination. [She] points out that women have not been used to wielding power, and are therefore not practiced in the conventions which men learn from childhood. Confronting power issues, she believes, will involve changing old concepts of power which view power as ‘all or none’, or as a win-lose situation.” (Moane, 1999, p. 91). Both power and change exist in shades of grey, but are not immediately understood in this light. Instead, a misleading dualism defines these terms, a misrepresentation especially debilitating for those not privy to the processes behind them.

For those wishing to create a community advocating for change there then remains the question of how to make change more accessible. For those working with the theory of liberation, this question may be especially pertinent since change is the cornerstone of liberation. Certainly a workshop that reinterprets the word change would be a good start where talking about what is not fair is an intermediary step. Incorporating other terminology like “transformation” may be another possibility. Further, an examination of the last session may also shed some light on a beneficial approach to the phenomenon of change.

At the last group meeting, the group’s attitude to discussing both the subject of change and political influences began to shift, and great strides toward acknowledging themselves as agents of change were made on that final day. In the wrap-up session, the women were asked to do an analysis of their own writings, looking at how they filled out the sheets over time. With this self analysis there seemed to be a shift in the way the women reacted to the subject of change, and instead of avoiding the topic, they embraced it.

- Researcher
Colleen: So what did you notice about the past few weeks?
- Charlotte: It changes your perspective of yourself. Like how to stand up for yourself. When to do it.
- Kate: How you think of yourself.
- Anna: You feel more powerful.
- Researcher
Colleen: More powerful how?
- Anna: I guess it just makes you realize where your feelings are coming from and it gives you the power to change the way you’re feeling about the messages that you’re getting I guess? And maybe to make other people aware.

Kate: I think this group helped me realize what's more important. I wouldn't say set boundaries yet, but got me thinking about what my boundaries are.

Researcher

Lorraine: And is that a good change?

Kate: Yes.

Anna: Internalize it and say "well I'm not good enough", "shitty for me."

Researcher

Lorraine: It's my fault?

Anna: Yeah

Kate: We have our voices now. Like my quote for me used to be "shit happens", but now it's more like "I have a voice and like, I can change (things)..."

Accordingly, it was after this self-reflection that the greatest strides in structural analysis were made in the wrap-up session. The women talked in depth about the poor treatment and unfairness they had received from Child and Family Services, and also about horizontal oppression. Both of these subjects are referred to as having systemic origins.

Researcher

Colleen: It's incredible how many structural things have come out of today's conversation. Amazing. You guys are talking about conscientization, policy, structural oppressions.

Betty: They're all into one so.

Researcher

Colleen: It seems to me that maybe these conversations were happening before the feedback, I don't know, but...

Anna: A little bit. You're pissed off...

Kate: You stop and think.

Charlotte: Since the workshop I find myself to be more aware of those things.

Group: Yeah.

Charlotte: Now I'm like "that's unfair!" Before I was like, it happened so it happens, but not I'm like, "that's not right."

Anna: yeah, and I feel like I have the right to say it's not right now. Instead of just saying "what-ever, I'm a young mom."

Betty: More confident to argue about it.

(laughter)

Researcher

Colleen: So before you get pissed off, but what would you do with that?

There are several inferences that can be made from this dialogue. The opinions of the participants credit the idea of structural analysis and internalized oppression as being at opposite ends of a spectrum of capacity to influence change. At one end of the spectrum, they locate processes that keep the status quo. For example, they understand their previous dismissal of their experiences as status quo fixed reality; they recognize their negative self talk as sustaining the status quo. At the other end of the spectrum they see that reconstituting their experiences as rooted in historical material conditions disrupts that internalized oppression and creates the conditions for imagining change. It also speaks very positively about the self-reflection activity the participants took part in before this conversational shift. It sheds some light on the process of change when working with an especially oppressed or stigmatized group. It would seem that the women saw that they had changed over the project and were giving voice to that new reframing of their experiences. In accordance with LP, oppressed people feel powerless, disconnected from others and are not aware of the oppressive forces that keep them down. However, after a self-examination of changes that they have been able to influence, they see themselves as more powerful, and as more capable of the process of change.

Since all people have experience with the process of change in their lives, perhaps it would be helpful to include a segment in a LP workshop which asks the participants to reflect about changes that they have made in their lives in the past, and to deconstruct them. This would serve two purposes: to show change for what it is—a process; and to make it evident that each participant is already an agent of change.

Another suggested alteration to the pilot would be to give greater context and theorizing to how social structures need collective and sustained action on various aspects to effect change. While the LP theory is about the collective nature of changing structures, sometimes the lived experience of naming those structures creates undue and unfair pressure on individuals being responsible for changing a society. While the theory privileges societal change as the ultimate revolutionary practice, the praxis is important. Therefore, group analysis and discussion about limit situations is key to how to create change that is more in keeping

with people's lived experience of change. It would be beneficial to contextualize the embedded nature of social structures but not so much from a deterministic (Marx, 1850) standpoint but rather from a problematization of the limit situation approach. Encouraging changes at an intrapersonal level might make the idea of change more manageable and better understood (Moane, 2011). Also, attempted changes would be more understood if it was about personal responses and therefore less likely to be perceived as failures. With these measures, the process of change may be more accessible and therefore more likely to be discussed.

The last of the final workshop day was dedicated to creating an artistic expression of some aspect of being in the project. The group had decided to each create their own masks, and two of the women created two masks to show what they called a transformation. In addition to her masks, Diane Perry (who stated she wanted her real name attributed to her poem for this publication) also submitted a poem to pass on to the next group of women, expressing her profound experience of being involved in the project. The poem depicts the group as a source of safety and empowerment. The group is also juxtaposed with a very harsh and judgmental outside world. Diane wrote the poem before meeting for the final wrap-up session.

*My world will keep on spinning, with judgment and unfair rights,
the wind will keep on blowing on those dark and saddened nights.*

*My head will keep on racing,
trying to conquer this maze.*

*But we will stick together,
and our hearts will never change.*

*Out in this world I am nobody,
another teen mom who has lost her way.*

*I need reminding of where I stand
at the end of every day.*

*I step into my home, my hollow,
and I see their eyes light up*

*You may think my life is disgraceful,
but to me it's more than enough.*

*I don't need you to make me smile,
and I won't let you hold me back.*

*I'll be the best that I can be,
I owe myself and loved ones that.*

*Your world I want no part of
and my world I have that right*

*Let your oppression try to conquer us
but we will stand up to fight*

*We are as one and not alone
and we are all somebody*

*Try if you will to break us down
we will not be oppressed or defeated by society.*

-- Diane Perry, 2009

While Diane sees herself as deriving new power to "fight back" from being in the project, there simultaneously exists a sense of powerlessness toward being able to change the oppressive status quo. Holding these two seemingly contradictory attitudes toward change at the same time

may show her attitude as being in transition and that she is living a dialectic of marginalization. The masks created by the women depicted similar themes. The masks contrasted grins and lightness, beauty and sparkles with darkness and sad expressions.

Conclusions

Participants expressed a positive transition in working through the eight week project. The women in the group greatly enjoyed and felt empowered from their experiences with other adolescent mothers. They identified shared oppressions, supported each other's analysis, and created a safe and strong group dynamic by sharing in each other's company. At first they resisted the subject of change or a systemic analysis by derailing conversations on these topics through the use of banter. Since internalized oppression fragments and disempowers people, the idea of being an agent of change is particularly foreign and likely to result in self-blame. Further, the common North American usage of the word 'change' is misleading and elitist. A deep analysis around the process of change that breaks it down into a process demanding very small actions at first, may benefit future projects. This holds particular relevance for multiply oppressed groups, and particularly with groups that did not form naturally around the goal of advocating for political change. Reflection and self-analysis about what the participants have already changed, and how that happened, may act as a catalyst for liberation. Indeed, once the women in this project saw themselves as agents of change, they achieved a high level of systemic analysis which functioned as a combatant to their internalized oppression.

The pattern of reluctance toward the concept of change by oppressed people suggests that there may be a need to explore this topic more thoroughly with the participants in studies of this kind. Oppressed persons' experiences and interpretations on the process of change would be an enriching further direction for those interested in LP. A workshop module about change may be ben-

eficial to future LP projects. The workshop would need to examine and recreate the concept of change to render it accessible. We took this analysis back to our participants to discuss these ideas with them. They affirmed our analysis of their reaction of derailing the topic with banter and recognized it as a resistance worth examination. They engaged with and extended our analysis with additional insights to how to make the idea of change more accessible and more likely to result in “revolutionary practice” (Marx & Engels, 1850, p. 198). We talked about the implications together for approximately 3 hours despite the fact that we had only scheduled 2 hours together. We are looking forward to extending this project with adolescent mothers across the Province.

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