Child & Youth Services

Thinking and Doing Prevention: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Youth Crime and Suicide Prevention Discourses

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Articles

Thinking and Doing Prevention: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Youth Crime and Suicide Prevention Discourses

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In this article, we have traced some of the dominant cultural narratives shaping current understandings of youth crime and suicide. We have aimed to show some of the ways that our received understandings of what the problem is and what should be done about it are social constructions that privilege a certain kind of scientific explanation. By starting from the premise that narrow, highly regulated approaches to studying these complex problems are bound to be inadequate we have argued that alternative ways of thinking, studying and doing prevention need to be considered. A number of theoretical frameworks, including constructionist, critical, and postmodern paradigms, have been identified as having a useful contribution to make. We conclude by recommending ways of thinking and doing prevention that capitalize on young people's wisdom, recognize more collaborative approaches to knowledge-making and community building, and enable multiple forms of critical engagement and resistance as well as engendering practices of hope and solidarity.

KEYWORDS crime prevention, critique, discourse, evidence-based practice, policy, risk, social constructionism, youth suicide prevention

> People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does. (Foucault, 1965)

The discourse of prevention, with its promise of healthier minds and bodies, safer communities, and brighter futures for our children, has an irresistible pull, making it an infrequent and somewhat unlikely candidate for critique. This is perhaps especially so in the field of child and youth services where millions of dollars are spent each year trying to prevent a range of social problems among youth, including substance misuse, crime, sexual violence, gang involvement, bullying, suicide, and disordered eating. Young people, as well as their families, schools and communities, are typically the targets of these prevention efforts which most often involve a combination of education and skill development, policy making, coalition building, environmental interventions, and social advocacy (see, e.g., Case, 2006; Hawkins, Shapiro, & Fagan, 2010). Prevention science, which is dedicated to advancing empirically validated approaches to prevention, has emerged as a distinct discipline and scholars working in this area have produced an abundance of rich and useful literature to guide prevention practice at the local and national level (Hawkins et al., 2010; Nation et al., 2003; Wandersman & Florin, 2003, to name just a few).

At the same time, the knowledge base regarding "what works" in preventing specific social problems among children and youth is highly variable. For example, the evidence in support of strategies addressing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use among youth is typically much stronger and more convincing than the evidence in support of preventive interventions for other social problems such as youth suicide for instance (Hawkins et al., 2010). We favor adopting prevention practices that show clear evidence of making a positive difference in specific local contexts, and discontinuing those approaches that appear to do harm or show no evidence of effectiveness. Unfortunately, many of the most challenging social problems among youth, including youth suicide and youth crime with which we are most familiar, are highly complex, historically contingent, situationally immersed, ethically, sociopolitically, culturally infused human experiences that do not easily lend themselves to empirical investigations predicated on stability, control, replication, and objectivity (Law, 2004). This leads to several complications when trying to study, evaluate and implement prevention interventions and policies aimed at reducing suicide and youth crime, including questions about what is to count as evidence.

Despite a seemingly unproblematic rationality underlying the evidence-based practice (EBP) discourse, many social problems simply cannot be fully understood nor solved, through an exclusive reliance on positivist methodologies, practices and policies (Goldson, 2010; Goldson & Muncie, 2006). In other words, practice and policy making are not about applying objective

evidence to clear and unambiguous problems that are well-bounded and have an independent and stable reality. Instead, "it is about *constructing* these problems through negotiation and deliberation, and using judgments to 'muddle through'—that is, to make context-sensitive choices in the face of persistent uncertainty and competing values" (Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009, p. 315, emphasis added).

As a way to respond to this complexity and acknowledge the muddling through quality of much prevention work, alternative research frameworks, including constructionist (also known as interpretivist), critical, and postmodern paradigms, have been identified as having a useful contribution to make (Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009; Stoneman, 2011a; White & Morris, 2010). Drawing from some of these alternative frameworks, we argue that by restricting our attention to the question of what works—*the* question at the heart of the EBP movement—we fall into the trap of believing that all social problems among youth are objective conditions for which a rational solution exists, and it is just a matter of identifying and applying the correct scientific evidence (Hastings, 2006). Using the examples of youth suicide and crime prevention specifically, we show that the available evidence tends to be fragmented, contradictory, limited, and contested (Miller, Eckert, & Mazza, 2009; Mawhinney, 1995; Henry & Milovanovic, 2000) and for these reasons, we suggest that technical solutions based on positivist assumptions and instrumental problem solving provide an inadequate basis for conceptualizing and responding to such complex social problems among youth.

Rather than feeling despair over this state of affairs, we believe this uncertainty is expected given the instability, sociopolitical origins, historical contingency and constructed nature of many social problems, especially those like suicide and crime which are constituted through complex social, historical, cultural, ethical, and political dimensions. As Amartya Sen writes in his forward to Paul Farmer's book *Pathologies of Power* (2005),

> A rich phenomenon with inherent ambiguities calls for a characterization that preserves those shady edges, rather than being drowned in the pretense that there is a formulaic and sharp delineation waiting to be unearthed that will exactly separate out all the sheep from the goats. (p. xiv)

By starting from the premise that narrow, highly regulated approaches to studying these complex problems are bound to be inadequate we believe that other questions need to be asked and alternative ways of thinking, studying and doing prevention need to be considered. To reiterate, this is not a call to practice in a non–evidence-based way. Rather, we hope to show how evidence, as a cultural category, excludes certain ways of knowing and places limits on what can be thought, said and done. Using our own sites of practice in youth suicide and crime prevention as platforms for exploration, and

knitting together multiple theoretical strands to achieve a kind of affirmative postmodernism (Henry & Milovanovic, 1996; Rosenau, 1992), we hope to both illuminate and trouble current conceptualizations of prevention, which will include offering potential alternatives.

Before moving on, it is important to clarify that these ideas are not new. Over 30 years ago, William Ryan (1971) argued that by blaming the individual and his/her family context, attention is diverted away from the constellation of more pressing troubles within the social structure. A particularly invidious effect of this victim blaming ideology is the tendency for it to be coupled with a sympathetic/humanitarian/charitable attitude where social scientists and those in the helping professions fail to recognize that they are implicated in the problem, and instead, express their sorrow that the poor/victim/other are afflicted by their own inability to escape the cycle of poverty/victimhood/otherness. This social arrangement sustains the role of the charitable helper and locates the problem within the individual— rather than the social. In a similar line of critique, Baratz and Baratz (1970) also argued for alternative methodologies and theories that identified and respected differences among children in ways that directly challenged the pathologizing tendencies and deficit models of the day. More than three decades later, we find that many prevention efforts continue to locate problems in the individual. As such, our arguments build on these important scholarly foundations.

To begin, we provide a brief introduction to our theoretical framework, which draws from a range of post-foundational ideas and critical perspectives, including discourse theory (Fairclough, 1992), social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Hardy, 2004), and policy archaeology (Foucault, 1972; Scheurich, 1994; Walton, 2010). What this means in practical terms, is that rather than accepting youth crime or youth suicide as self-evident, objective conditions awaiting discovery, a certain amount of discursive work (i.e., human activity) is required to bring these problems into being (Hogeveen, 2007; Loseke, 1990; Walton, 2010). We then provide a brief overview of contemporary prevention and policy discourses, making visible some of their epistemological foundations and unspoken normative assumptions, including positivism, social control, and constructions of deviance. Drawing on examples from our own practice contexts of youth suicide and crime prevention, we emphasize some of the limiting and constraining features of prevention discourses which are rooted in neoliberal ideologies and include such practices as risk management, expert knowledge, calculation, surveillance, and control (Stoneman, 2011a).

Specifically we aim to show some of the ways that our received understandings of what the problem is and what should be done about it are social constructions that privilege scientific explanations, rational decision-making and measurable outcomes (Goldson & Muncie, 2006; Walton, 2010). Pushing against these narrow conceptualizations, we invite a more expansive view of

prevention that recognizes the complex, uncertain, political and thoroughly ethical character of many social problems, and argue for a broader, more inclusive range of methodologies for studying and documenting everyday prevention practices. In the final section, we draw on this re-conceptualized view of prevention to highlight promising directions already underway. We suggest ways of thinking and doing prevention that capitalize on young people's wisdom, emphasize child and youth rights, recognize more collaborative approaches to knowledge-making and community building, and enable multiple forms of critical engagement and resistance as well as engendering practices of hope and solidarity.

THEORETICAL RESOURCES

Postmodern social theories, which represent a range of overlapping and contradictory perspectives, emerged in the late 20th century in response to some of the perceived shortcomings and unspoken assumptions of the modernist Enlightenment project, including: an overall privileging of rationality; understanding language as a transparent medium for transmitting reality; conceptualizing the self as autonomous, bounded, and singular; and emphasizing the role of the science (specifically positivism) in solving social problems (Rosenau, 1992; Taylor & White, 2000). Representing a productive set of tools for undertaking social analysis and critique, postmodern ideas, or what some have called postfoundational theories (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions to show the contingencies, multiplicities, and complex relations of power that shape understandings of what is good, right, true and normal. There are multiple strands of postfoundational thinking. Each has a rich history and all are taken up in different ways within diverse disciplines and intellectual traditions. Postmodern or postfoundational ideas, as we are using the terms here, encompass a range of perspectives that challenge totalizing and overly deterministic ways of thinking and invite skepticism towards objective, value-free, acontexual knowledge or singular truths about reality. It is important to clarify that we align ourselves with an affirmative postmodernism which, in contrast to skeptical postmodernism, can be understood as "hopeful [and] optimistic . . . oriented toward process" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 16), as well as "nondogmatic [and] tentative" (p. 17).

Discourse

A common thread within our theoretical framework is the concept of discourse. Discourses represent particular ways of talking about and understanding the world. They have implications for how practitioners think about their work and influence the identities they take up. According to Phillips

and Hardy (2002), the ideas and concepts within particular social and historical contexts can be understood as discourses. Consequently, discourses are not solely representations of social life, practices, and actors, but instead are *constitutive* features of social interactions, producing and positioning social members (Fairclough, 2001). Regularities across statements and concepts that make up discourses are what Foucault refers to as discursive formations in the *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972). Of interest to him was how discourses continue and modify across time and space. For example, over the course of history, suicide has been understood as a sin, a crime, a form of protest, and now in the West, it is almost always read as evidence of psychopathology or a mental illness (Marsh, 2010). Delinquency, on the other hand has for centuries been characterized as a problem of individual deviance (Stoneman, 2011b). Thus at one time a new discourse seems strange given the regularity within the discursive practice but at a later point the new discourse may become common sense language. Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter (2000) suggest that within all discursive social practices, including youth suicide or youth crime prevention, certain ways of thinking and understanding become taken-for-granted and appear to be beyond questioning.

A key influence on the ability for discursive formations to change or remain static is the dialectical relationship (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Altheide's (2000, 2003) examination of a dominant discourse in North American culture, the "discourse of fear" is particularly illustrative of this dialectical relationship. Despite the pervasiveness of the discourse of fear, contemporary indicators of danger and risk, including crime statistics, actually suggest that the public is far safer now than before. Regardless of these data, the discourse of fear persists. In other words, the discourse in part creates—and is created by—shared perceptions. The social repercussions (e.g., risk-based prevention techniques) of such a relationship reinforce the idea that discourses are not solely representations, but actually direct social action. The consequences of this discourse of fear are not insignificant. For example,

> the demise of public space, citizens who are becoming more "armed" and "armored," and the promotion of a new social identity—the victim—that has been exploited by numerous claims-makers, including politicians, who promote their own propaganda about national and international politics. (Altheide, 2003, p. 10)

At the same time, contemporary discourses of fear and risk both animate and provide the justification for many prevention efforts in youth crime and suicide prevention. Exploring some of the ways in which these social realities are constructed through language and other social practices is the focus of the next section.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism foregrounds the role of relational understandings and stresses the place of context, coordinated social practices, and language in generating communal knowledge (Gergen, 2000, 2009; Taylor & White, 2000). Such an approach also calls attention to the uncertainties, contradictions and ambiguities of human experience and recognizes that there are multiple understandings and interpretations of what is real, good, and true. Postmodern researchers and scholars generally endorse the idea that statements, language, and other coordinated social practices bring social life into existence (Gergen, 2000; Hardy, 2004). A consequence of the use and repetition of various discourses and language traditions is that they become socially constituting. In other words the language we use not only represents, but also *creates* the world (Altheide, 2003).

In their formative book on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that we readily create ideal types and patterns in our discussion and representation of the social world. Social facts—or taken-for-granted meanings—are not objective derivatives from an independent reality. Rather, they are products of the human activities that have created them and exist within entrenched patterns of discourse and complex relations of power. In a later section we will show the constructed nature of complex social problems, using youth suicide and youth crime as examples.

Policy Archaeology

The role of policy in actively constructing social problems cannot be underestimated. As others have suggested, " . . . problems are problems because of the ways in which certain ideas, ideologies, practices, and discourses frame them as such" (Kameniar, Imoutal, & Bradley, 2010, p. 15).

Similarly, Walton (2010), inspired by Scheurich's (1994) policy archaeology methodology (a Foucauldian approach to policy analysis), argues that polices are practices that discursively construct social problems, create the category of problematic people and generate policy responses as solutions. Consistent with discourse theory and social constructionism, Walton contends that accepted/dominant ways of thinking about a particular problem (e.g., youth crime or youth suicide) are not necessarily the correct or exclusive ways to conceptualize the problem. When social forces (e.g., neo-conservative policy strategies and moral panics) demand simplistic policy solutions, policy problems are conceptualized as simple as well. Policies are not static texts but rather are sites of continual contestation and negotiation. Furthermore, the very ways that problems are conceptualized and framed may well be part of the problem, a paradoxical quality that Walton refers to as "the problem trap" (p. 135).

This approach invites a re-thinking of how we understand the social processes of policy making and analysis, including prevention frameworks

for at-risk youth. We need to attend to the power relations that imbue policy texts and critically analyze the taken for granted hegemonic assumptions and institutional structures that bring problems into being, which in turn place limits on what can be imagined as potential solutions. This requires an ongoing engagement with the complexities, multiplicities and contradictory qualities of these problems. This contrasts with a rational, technical normative approach to policy making where "policy analysts and historians tend to focus upon explaining social problems rather than upon describing conditions that facilitate their emergence into social visibility" (Walton, 2010, p. 137). Policy archaeology methodology holds immense potential as a way to get at these complex conditions and can inform a critical understanding of messy social issues such as youth suicide and youth crime.

In the next section we draw from these theoretical resources to critically examine contemporary discourses of prevention. More precisely, using mainstream youth crime and suicide prevention practices as sites of analysis, we show the socially constructed nature of these problems, the policy solutions and practice responses that are made available as a result, and explore some of the implications for young people, practitioners and communities.

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES OF PREVENTION

Prevention science is a burgeoning field. It emphasizes the identification and analysis of risk factors and advocates for the deployment of evidence-based practices for solving a range of problems among youth, including tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse, youth violence, risky sexual behaviour, youth suicide and school dropout. Positive youth development, asset-building, strengthening families and other upstream approaches represent one end of the prevention continuum (primary or universal prevention). Other, more targeted prevention approaches are aimed at specific groups of young people who have been identified as at-risk for a particular disorder (secondary or selected prevention) or who already exhibit undesirable behavior (tertiary or indicated prevention). The concept of risk reduction, which is rooted in a public health paradigm, drives many of these prevention programs (Mzarek & Haggerty, 1994).

Reviews of prevention research findings have led to the identification of key characteristics associated with effective prevention programs, especially those addressing youth substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, school failure, and juvenile delinquency. Effective prevention programs are those that rely on varied teaching methods, provide a sufficient dosage, are theory-driven and comprehensive in scope, provide opportunities for positive relationships, are appropriately timed and socioculturally relevant, utilize outcome evaluations, and employ well-trained staff (Nation et al., 2003). Despite the emergence of promising evidence in support of *some* prevention

programs for *some* groups, many questions remain about the promise and potential of these programs. In other words, "[p]revention science needs much further development. Results . . . show a mixed record of achieving outcomes, and reports of outcomes themselves may be open to contention" (Wandersman & Florin, 2003).

One way to interpret such limited findings has been to focus on the failures related to transmitting evidence-based research findings to the field. Calls to close the gap between science and practice through better knowledge dissemination techniques are one expression of this. This is a good example of the discursive work that goes into social problem construction and policy making. Specifically, the limited and contested evidence base in prevention becomes constructed as a technical problem that can be resolved with better communication technologies. Such a formulation can only be viable if the relationship between research and practice is imagined as an unproblematic, apolitical, linear process for which clear solutions exist.

While such neat and tidy logic is what drives much of the prevention science movement, we suggest that such a narrow and static approach to constructing complex social problems and generating potential solutions is potentially limiting. In the next section we draw on our experiences with youth crime prevention and suicide prevention discourses to show some of these limitations, using some of the questions posed by Walton (2010) as a springboard:

> Whose voices are included in articulations of the 'problem'? Who gets to decide how goals to resolve the stated problem are to be set and met? Who gets to state the terms of reference for the problem and how have they been informed of such terms? How might the dominant narrative of the problem belie broader social complexities, controversies, inequities, and contexts? (p. 136)

Youth Crime Prevention

Theoretically speaking, youth crime prevention is often based on rational choice and opportunity theories (White, 1998). Accordingly, reducing opportunities and increasing penalties and an offender's chances of getting caught each hold potential for reducing criminal behavior. A related strategy has been to reduce criminal opportunities by restricting movement of marginalized and impoverished people (often youth) such that they will not have opportunities to offend. In the United States for example, this is accomplished with the presence of gated communities, gang-free parks and CCTV cameras—the privatization of public spaces more generally. Side effects of such measures include an increased fear of crime and, more importantly, social exclusion. Though these approaches fit well within a common sense

and empirically entrenched rational choice model of crime prevention, the perspective does little to attend to the social causes of crime and disorder (not to mention the problems of adaptation to surveillance and displacement of criminal activity).

In another offshoot of the youth crime prevention paradigm, a leading strategy in Canada and abroad (e.g., the United Kingdom) relies on deficit models applied to the individuals identified as most at risk. The variety of gang prevention programs supported by Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention (NCP) Strategy (Public Safety Canada, 2012) is a recent example. By naming gang crime as a key national priority, the strategy is premised on the notion that an important way to affect change is to respond to known risk (e.g., early onset of aggressiveness, substance use, and delinquency; familial drug use and criminal involvement; poor school achievement; and social disorganization) and protective factors. The strategy assumes the cumulative effects of the risk factors demand early intervention where building protective factors promotes resilience.

Despite concerns around marginalizing, criminalizing, and stigmatizing at risk youth with provisions of (often school-based) early interventions, such measures may actually justify increased surveillance and social control (Case, 2006) of those who do not fit the status quo. For the most part, "the concept of prevention . . . is set within a positivist analytical framework that assumes that scientific analysis can identify the factors . . . that produce harm, and that intervention strategies can be designed to limit the negative impact of these factors . . ." (Stoneman, 2011a, p. 22). Though the practices of crime prevention are generally considered technical, objective, rational activities, the character of those targeted by situational crime prevention and early intervention should not be glossed over. White (1998) argues that typically, it is the most marginalized people within a community that garner the least assistance and the most stigma from situational crime prevention because of their often impoverished status in society.

One example of a gang-prevention program supported by Canada's NCP Strategy is the Breaking the Cycle Youth Gang Exit and Ambassador Leadership Program (BTC) operating in two Ontario communities identified as high-risk. The 28-week program uses a hybrid of intervention techniques including personal development, case management and employment development to address risk factors. BTC is designed to decrease gang involvement and increase the involvement of targeted youth in prosocial activities in the community, including work. Notably the program focuses on the individual as the source of criminal and anti-social behavior neglecting the socio-politico-cultural variables that relate to gang behavior such as poverty and systemic racism. In this sense, the individual unit or micro experience (in some cases including the family and the community) is identified as the problem, and prevention techniques are directed exclusively at this level.

Though the problem of school violence is not new, concern around the phenomenon in Canada seemed to surge in the mid-1990s. This was coupled with zero-tolerance policies and public panic, which suggested school violence was on the rise. Researchers fueled discussion around the topic by producing statistics and summaries of survey research that seemed to mirror public fear that violence in the schoolyard was becoming both more frequent and more vicious.

Mawhinney (1995) argues that the criminal justice system tends to locate and hence, treat problems on the micro scale demonstrating little ability to respond to problems concerning structural social issues (e.g., child poverty, systemic racism, social inequality). This trend is exemplified in the zero-tolerance movement of the 1990s and more recently in Canada's NCP Strategy. Instead of examining socio-politico-cultural issues, justice and prevention techniques are premised on correcting what are framed/constructed as wrongs against the state, unavoidably limiting available response options.

These limits are exacerbated by two issues that permeate the EBP/crime prevention landscape: techniques of effective social programming are exported to other environments under the heading of "what works" and, evaluations of crime prevention measures tend to emphasize measurable outputs rather than appreciable outcomes (e.g., an actual decrease in crime; Cherney, 2000). The first issue is especially problematic given that effective prevention programs are not systematically a sum of their technical parts; even when a program is promising, nothing indicates that its discrete parts can be imported to new settings, delivered by diverse practitioners to different youth. The crime prevention discourse exemplifies a practice that extracts features that show promise in one setting and imports these features into another setting.

Second, concern with measurable outputs on the micro scale tends to over-shadow the socio-politico-cultural issues that feature importantly in the criminal etiology. A case in point: the Abbotsford Youth Crime Prevention Project identifies two specific groups of youths who are at a high risk for gang involvement in that region: (a) South Asian youth engaging in, or at risk of engaging in, antisocial and risky conduct such as gang involvement and/or other criminal behavior, and (b) youth who have experienced marginalization relating to homelessness, sexual exploitation, and street-life (Public Safety Canada, 2012). Interestingly, the prevention project addresses symptoms of marginalization (exploitation and homelessness) that lead to criminal activity (gang involvement) rather than the social conditions that lead to marginalization. Prevention activities as a result, target the individual level rather than a combination of micro, meso and macro factors.

Similarly, evaluation efforts measure variables that contribute to the social bond such as prosocial attachments and commitment to appropriate goals (Public Safety Canada, 2012) rather than measuring macro concepts such as why gangs form in the first place, and why particular groups of youth

are more at risk for criminal involvement. Though the program efforts are admirable, they gloss over the structural forces of society that position some individuals in marginalized roles and others in mainstream roles.

For example the aims of the Abbotsford Project tend to re-inscribe dominant assumptions whereby society is set up as external, or in opposition, to crime (Schinkel, 2002). Specifically, the cause of gang behavior in the case of the Abbotsford Project can be understood simply as a lack of connection to conventional society. The assumption here is that delinquents do not belong to conventional society or really any society at all. Furthermore, when individual level criminogenic factors are explored, researchers and practitioners neglect to consider "how some people continuously get to be situated on the 'lower' edge of society, which often leaves them no alternative but to engage in activities that are, by those 'higher' in the hierarchy labeled as 'criminal'" (p. 139).

Though the ideas underpinning the Abbotsford Project are put forth in a seemingly neutral way, they function to reinforce and institutionalize the binary between delinquent and prosocial members of society. The dominant view is thus one where delinquents are on the peripheries of society. Their criminal behavior is conceptualized as one that starts outside of society and invades the functioning society. The natural resolution is to look within the individual to locate and repair the criminogenic factors. Such an approach precludes an examination of society itself as a part of the cause of delinquency.

Youth Suicide Prevention

In North America, rates of suicide among young people aged 15 to 19 tripled between the 1950s and the 1980s (Statistics Canada, 2012). Programs designed to prevent youth suicides proliferated in response. These prevention programs were predicated on particular unspoken understandings of what the problem was and what should be done about it. Taking their cues from the recommendations emerging from the prevention science literature, proponents of youth suicide prevention programs typically advocated for comprehensive, research-informed, multi-strategy approaches, which were to be implemented across the prevention continuum (Kalafat, 2005). Accordingly, contemporary approaches to youth suicide prevention are usually based on one or more of the following strategies: suicide awareness education for youth, gatekeeper training for those who come into close proximity with youth (e.g., parents, school staff, family physicians), school-based screening programs, skill development and social support enhancement for at-risk youth, and policy interventions such as means restriction and media reporting guidelines (Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003).

While some suicide prevention strategies, including physician education, means restriction (e.g., restricting access to firearms or other methods), media reporting practices, and other community-wide approaches appear to

hold promise (Mann et al., 2005), very few have been conclusively linked to a reduction in overall suicide rates, and fewer still have been linked to a decline in youth suicides. Thus the peculiar demand for more evidence-based practices in a field in which the evidence base is both contested and limited leaves suicide prevention educators practicing in a very contradictory and precarious space (White & Morris, 2010).

In spite of this uncertainty, schools continue to be primary sites for youth suicide prevention. By critically exploring some of the recommendations that are being promoted in the mainstream suicidology literature, it becomes possible to see some of the dominant ways that the problem of youth suicide has been constructed and show the solutions that come into view as a result. As can be seen in the examples presented below, selected findings from the research literature are mobilized to achieve what Foucault (1972) refers to as a regime of truth. In other words, these ideas are treated as incontrovertible facts as opposed to products of certain traditions, discourses, and authorized ways of making meaning.

For example, the Signs of Suicide (SOS) program, which is an empirically validated classroom based suicide prevention program, teaches students that "…suicide is directly related to mental illness, typically depression, and…suicide is not a normal reaction to stress or emotional upset" (Aseltine & DiMartino 2004, p. 446). Further, the objective of the SOS classroom-based suicide prevention program "…is to make the action steps…as instinctual a response as the Heimlich maneuver and as familiar an acronym as CPR" (p. 446). In a related vein, Ciffone (2007) argues that the main purpose of school-based programs is to "…frame suicide in the context of its being a manifestation of a mental illness that results from, includes, or exacerbates certain thinking errors" (p. 46). Similarly, a series of safe messaging tips, which are basically a list of do's and don'ts meant to guide suicide prevention educators, have recently been developed (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2010). These include such things as "*do* highlight effective treatments for underlying mental health problems" and "*don't* explain suicide as an inexplicable act or explain it as a result of stress only."

While many contemporary school-based suicide prevention programs are ostensibly grounded in public health approaches—which emphasize the promotion of positive behaviors, community collaboration, and the use of research to advance knowledge—a strong psychological and individualistic orientation remains. For example, Miller et al. (2009) undertook a review of school-based suicide prevention programs based on a public health framework and recommended "programs should ensure that they are providing accurate information to students, including emphasizing the link between suicide and mental health problems" (p. 182). Further, they recommend teaching students specific skills such as coping and problem solving. As a consequence, students bear the primary responsibility for changing, leaving

potentially oppressive social conditions or institutional structures virtually untouched.

As these examples make clear, youth suicide prevention programs take as their starting point the assumption that youth who are contemplating suicide are depressed or suffering from a mental disorder and in need of expert intervention, preferably from a qualified mental health practitioner. Further, since youth suicide is conceptualized as an individual, apolitical problem, technical metaphors like first-aid are assumed to adequately capture the nature of prevention work.

A number of additional problems can be identified with these main-stream approaches. First when educators are required to make an explicit link between suicide and mental illness—an imperative that Marsh (2010) refers to as "a compulsory ontology of pathology" (p. 31)—all other ways of understanding suicide are censored. Further, the problem is constructed as one for which the solution is "the provision of accurate information," suggesting that it may be a lack of knowledge about the links between suicide and mental illness that is contributing to the emergence of suicidal behavior among young people. Second, historical, political, or social forces, including racism, heteronormativity, material deprivation, social and political inequities, as well as other forms of structural violence (Farmer, 2005) which undeniably contribute to the production of distress, suffering, and suicidality in highly complex ways, are obscured from view. Third, despite the common sense appeal of skill-building or positive youth-development efforts that are embedded in many suicide prevention programs, several of these programs have been criticized for failing to take into account the lived realities of many racialized and minority youth, including poverty, interpersonal violence, and racism (Ginwright & Cammatota, 2002). Fourth, once a student is identified as at risk for suicide he or she becomes objectified as a fragile, "ready-to-be-acted-upon Other" (Hosking, 2008, p. 676) in need of control or super-vision. Most often this means positioning nonsuicidal peers and classmates as responsible for detecting risk *in* others and facilitating their referral to a mental health professional (White & Morris, 2010). Fifth, many standardized approaches to detecting risk and responding to individuals in a suicidal crisis reflect a one-size-fits-all mentality (Rogers & Soyka, 2004), which can potentially leave those on the receiving end of these practices feeling de-humanized and objectified.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING PREVENTION: EXPANDING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THINKING AND DOING

Perhaps the most integral aspect of re-thinking prevention, early intervention and their associated concepts is the identification of ways forward with respect to practice, policy, and research. We have identified what we see

as problematic in the status quo; now we consider some potential alterna-
tives. We are not the first to consider the lessons post structuralism has for
how we think about prevention. In the following section we will offer some
tangible ways to re-conceptualize prevention by highlighting and building
upon what has already been done.

Practice

As Henry and Milovanovic (2000) state "constitutive criminology argues for a
transpraxis that is deconstructive, reconstructive, and sensitive to the dialec-
tics of struggle" (pp. 275–276). Such a transpraxis might move forward by
substituting contingent and provisional truths for universality and totalizing
grand narratives (Arrigo, Milovanovic, & Schehr, 2005). Transpraxis would
pay close attention to how marginalized youth subjectively experience inter-
ventions thus, questioning and reversing the hierarchical structure of positi-
vist, objective practice (see, e.g., Jacobs, Kissil, Scott, & Davey, 2010).

   Wexler (2006) offers an example of how this orientation might be taken
up in the field of youth suicide prevention. Working as the suicide preven-
tion coordinator in Northwest Alaska over a two-year period, Wexler
describes how she used a participatory action research (PAR) methodology
to engage Inupiat community members in ongoing and transformative con-
versations about youth suicide. By trying to better understand how com-
munity members made sense of youth suicide and eliciting dominant
cultural narratives of the problem, she creatively set the stage for collective
critique and social action. For example, rather than continuing to reify com-
munity members' understandings of themselves as unhealthy through the
presentation of youth suicide statistics and other indicators of dysfunction
which predictably led to despondency and self-blame, Wexler recommended
changing the conversation.

   More specifically, by centering community action, resilience and resist-
ance and by re-conceptualizing colonization as something that continues in
many forms today, "Inupiat can marshal the moral agency to withstand and
resist oppressive structures" (Wexler, 2006, p. 2947). In this way, local com-
munity practices aimed at de-colonization become an important youth
suicide prevention strategy. This alternative approach to youth suicide pre-
vention directly engages with the sociocultural and political forces that have
influenced the emergence of hopelessness, despair and suicidality in many
Indigenous communities. In contrast to traditional approaches to youth
suicide prevention, which locate problems in persons and grant profes-
sionals the authority to intervene and respond, this alternative approach,
mobilizes young peoples' knowledge, skills and strategies of resistance as
part of a larger social change effort. In other words, young people are posi-
tioned as knowledgeable and active agents of change as opposed to mere
assets or passive service recipients (Ginwright & James, 2002).

Policy

Policy-making processes can also become creative sites of critical analysis and transformation. For example, Hogeveen (2005) examined the Canadian Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) and held the concept of community up for scrutiny and critique. A central motivator for Hogeveen was the observation that the community, a taken for granted social institution, had been treated as unproblematic and neutral yet was positioned as a cornerstone in a set of remedies to youth crime. Hogeveen argues that the concept of community is meaningless unless borders are set defining the in-group and out-group. By its very nature, the term helps to construct the social exclusion of some group(s). Thus, the meaning that we ascribe to the concept of community is shown to be a by-product of the discourses that emerged from historical understandings of community as an institution, routines of performing youth justice, and practices of governance and incarceration.

The dominance of the policy discourse of evidence-based practice (EBP) within the field of suicidology is also ripe for critique (White, 2007; White & Morris, 2010). For example, it is clear that the suicide prevention field is deeply committed to using scientific evidence in the design and implementation of school-based suicide prevention programs (Miller et al., 2009). As the editor of one of the main suicidology journals published in North America recently suggested "hypothesis testing with fair tests using valid and quantifiable metrics" (Joiner, 2011, p. 471) offers the most rigorous and defensible set of standards for advancing and adjudicating competing knowledge claims in the field of suicidology. Meanwhile, from 2005–2007, less than three percent of the research articles published in the three main international suicidology journals were based on qualitative studies (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010).

Criticizing such narrowly constructed, hierarchical definitions of evidence, some have boldly suggested that by valuing only one way of knowing, the EBP discourse potentially thwarts creativity and silences other ways of knowing. For example, Holmes, Murray, Perron, and Rail (2006) write,

> An evidence-based, empirical world view is dangerously reductive insofar as it negates the personal and interpersonal significance and meaning of a world that is first and foremost a *relational* world, and not a fixed set of objects . . . . (p. 182)

In response to some of these objections, more recent conceptualizations of EBP have started to highlight the importance of client participation and shared decision-making in clinical practice (Adams & Drake, 2006). By recognizing the place of culture, context, values, and relationships in everyday practice (Issacs, Huang, Hernandez, & Echo-Hawk, 2002) and by granting greater legitimacy to qualitative research (Case, 2006; Gilgun, 2006;

Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010) and practice-based evidence, the fields of youth suicide and crime prevention could benefit from more expansive and participatory approaches to knowledge generation and policy making. Further, policy frameworks that acknowledge the role of social resistance in the emergence of unhealthy or high risk behaviors (i.e., non-dominant groups may engage in unhealthy behaviors as a viable *response* to social power relations), may be more fruitful than those that assume that individuals are at-risk because of psychological problems, bad choices, or inadequate knowledge (Factor, Kawachi, & Williams, 2011).

Research

Positivist and post-positivist scientific traditions typically assume that there is an independent and stable external reality that is available for researchers to discover and map. Methods and techniques that emphasize predictability, measurability and generalizability are often favored. As we have highlighted throughout this article, such conventional methodologies may be limited when trying to better understand messy social problems like youth suicide and youth crime. Specifically,

> If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities. But one thing is sure: if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate and to know in new ways. We will need to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual or unknown in social science. (Law, 2004, p. 2)

Given the inherent complexity, instability and contingent quality of youth crime and suicide, we suggest that multiple frameworks, methodologies, and perspectives (which need to include the active contributions of young people), are required to adequately (re-)theorize youth suicide and crime prevention. In 2004, Derrick Armstrong made some important progress in presenting a new research agenda that would consider the social context when exploring how young people come to become involved in crime. Like others, Armstrong suggests that studies of risk and propensity for criminal behavior have systematically ignored *how* young people negotiate their behavior and *how* they participate in their social worlds. Accordingly, Armstrong (p. 110) recommended the following considerations for a more comprehensive and richly theorized research agenda:

- The voices of young people
- The meaning and significance of risk and protective factors to both children and their families

- The impact of constructions of risk and protection on how children and young people negotiate pathways into and out of crime
- The eco-systemic relationship between different aspects of children's experience
- The processes of resistance to criminal pathways
- The impact of interactions with formal and informal social structure, institutions and processes upon the lives of children and young people

Hence, quantitative research directing early intervention should be supplemented with qualitative, inductive work for methodological, practical and ethical reasons (Case, 2006). Such an approach might emphasize local consultations with youth aiming to open opportunities to move beyond their usual roles of passive research subjects/participants towards roles as co-researchers. Moving towards qualitative assessments could also stress individual differences within risk categories and would carve out a participatory role for children and youth (aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

As one example, photovoice has been effectively used as a participatory action research methodology to enable youth to document and transform their social contexts (Wang, 2006). By centering young peoples' experiences and realities, this approach to research subverts more traditional approaches to knowledge generation and is explicitly guided by the values of citizen participation, social advocacy and public advocacy. The specific goals of any photovoice project are to enable youth to "record and represent their everyday realities; promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and reach policymakers" (p. 148).

Another example comes from the work of Fullagar (2003) who utilized a post-structuralist analytic framework to explore how young people in Australia made sense of suicide. More specifically, through in-depth interviews with 41 youth, she elicited understandings of risk, suicide, and prevention, and invited suggestions for change. By focusing much of her analysis on the social dynamics of shame, Fullagar directly challenged many of the taken-for-granted, biomedical understandings of suicide. Specifically, by highlighting how neo-liberal discourses, with their emphasis on emotional self-regulation and self-management work to individualize shame, Fullagar raises important new questions for how we think about the work of youth suicide prevention. She also invites us to consider how our "solutions" may have unwittingly become part of the problem:

> Discourses of mental health and illness within suicide policy and prevention programmes actually work to invisiblize the effects of culture on the embodied self. The emphasis on diagnosis and treatment of suicidal ideation, depression and self-harm as mental health problems may actually

participate in the process of subjectification whereby the subject 'sees' their own self as pathological and hence shameful. (p. 301)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have traced some of the dominant cultural narratives shaping current understandings of youth crime and suicide. We have shown some of the ways that these methods of conceptualizing the problems have come to shape contemporary prevention frameworks. By opening up for scrutiny some of the tacit assumptions that shape everyday practices, policies and approaches to research in the crime and youth suicide prevention fields, we have sought to create more freedom for alternative frameworks to be considered (Marsh, 2010). As others have persuasively argued,

> Our accountability to the people we serve will come not from efforts to prove the authority of our knowledge, nor from efforts to dismantle it and prove it groundless. It will come instead from a more reflective and dialogic engagement with our knowledge, and with the people served through it—an engagement that seeks constantly to problematize our knowing, to probe and critique it, to trace its origins and assumptions, and explore its implications, to open it to inquiry and transformation. (McKee Sellick, Delaney, & Brownlee, 2002, p. 493)

It is our modest hope that the ideas presented here will help to encourage ways of thinking, practicing and researching that not only resist existing structures, but more importantly, acknowledge the contingencies of the social world. We also hope that the field of prevention can move forward with the recognition that we can only ever identify tentative, contextual answers; not totalizing solutions. Finally, as we have suggested here, we believe that contemporary prevention efforts should be re-conceptualized in more expansive, generative and critically reflexive ways so that we can move beyond an exclusive focus on what works to engage with other questions, including those concerning values, ethics, politics, relationships, and justice.

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