ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Our Seat at the Table: Mentorship, Advocacy, & Youth Leadership in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This commentary discusses strategies and models for engaging diverse community partnerships through the Youth of Color Needs Assessment, a community-based participatory research project that elevates the voices and experiences of homeless and unstably housed youth of color in King County, Washington. Building upon the lens and expertise of a young Community Advocate thrust into research, it explores the strengths of youth of color leadership and best practices for trauma-informed, relational support for youth leaders and focus group participants alike. These insights offer a youth-centered model for the field grounded in engagement, sustainability, and ethics for research within and for communities at the margins.

Keywords Youth of color · Leadership · Advocacy · Mentorship · Community-based research · Needs assessment · Homelessness · Housing

Introduction

Violence has a way of ripping us apart at the seams. In King County, Washington, youth of color experience homelessness at higher rates than their white peers. Despite this, regional housing efforts have struggled to understand and respond to the unique conditions of their lives. We do not always think of youth homelessness as an issue of gender-based violence. It is. Audre Lorde would assure us, "we don't live single issue lives." Systems of oppression compound violence; we see this reflected in the disproportionate representation of youth of color and queer and trans youth among unhoused young people. Youth experiencing violence—at home, in their intimate relationships, predicated on their gender or sexuality, or at the hands of the state—are more likely to find themselves without a safe and stable place to live. Not only this, youth who are homeless or unstably housed are at increased risk for experiencing gender-based violence. As advocates, we see these examples day in and day out: A Latinx genderqueer teen is kicked out after yet another fight over what they must wear to school, a young Black woman moves in with a controlling

and abusive partner because home is too unstable and crowded, an undocumented queer young person trades sex with adults for a place to stay while avoiding identification requirements, chronic harassment, and fights at the youth shelters. These harms fray and unravel. They devastate, overwhelm and isolate young people until we lose foundation, stability, connection, sense of self.

Our region, like most of the country, has struggled to identify and address the intricacies of these connections for youth of color in particular. One coordinated effort, the King County Comprehensive Plan to End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness, which strives to make homelessness *rare, brief,* and *one time*, has explicitly committed to addressing the aforementioned disproportionate rates at which youth of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) youth experience homelessness. In the years since its founding, the County took significant steps to research and increase support for homeless LGBTQ youth; however, even after these efforts, very little was done to even begin understanding disproportionality and chronic homelessness for youth of color. Many providers and policy makers speculated based on "anecdotal evidence" that youth of color simply "didn't identify as homeless" and therefore did not seek supports. Despite their expertise on the matter, community leaders of color by and large did not have a seat at the table in regional change making discussions. And these community leaders faced an ongoing question: where was their "*real*" evidence?

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Founded in 1987, The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse (The NW Network) works to end violence and abuse by building loving and equitable relationships in our community and across the country (NW Network n.d.). Through direct services and community engagement work, the NW Network is precisely interested in these intersections of oppression for our communities, building a longstanding history as a regional leader in advocating for LGBTQ youth experiencing gender-based violence in a broad sense. Recognizing the complexities of youth's lives and inextricable connections between intimate violence and housing instability, the NW Network ultimately became a key player in the regional efforts to combat youth homelessness. This work included leading Project EQTY (Elevating Queer and Trans Youth), a three-year coordinated training and technical assistance project that used a cohort-model to increase the capacity of youth homelessness service providers to support LGBTQ young people. With a foundation of community-based research, training and technical assistance, organizing, and change work at the county and national levels, the NW Network was uniquely positioned to address the evidence gap on youth of color's experiences of homelessness. Building on our existing relationships within queer and trans communities of color and coalitions with anti-racist organizations and community leaders, we developed a research project to respond to this need: The Youth of Color Needs Assessment.

With a participatory, community-based approach, The YOC Needs Assessment provided an unprecedented examination of the overrepresentation of youth of color among homeless and unstably housed young people in King County, Washington. With a core team of NW Network staff, community partners, and youth leaders, we conducted 12 focus groups with homeless and unstably housed youth of color (13–24 years-old) across the county. The YOC Needs Assessment elevated youth of color voices at each stage to clarify their unique experiences, strengths, and needs. The final report provides recommendations to the County and key stakeholders to strengthen efforts and resources to support youth of color in the region. In addition to this report, the Needs Assessment successfully fostered effective and meaningful youth of color leadership and community partnerships. For the gender-based violence field, it offers a window into the lasting impacts of advocacy, mentorship, and people power for young researchers acting in service of their own communities.

Resisting violence begins with our relationships. As a young person doing community-based participatory research for the first time, what follows is an account of my experience supporting other young people to do and learn from this difficult work. Together we built an evidence base out of a liberatory ethic, one predicated on bearing witness to the power, resilience, and struggles of our peers. As an advocate and activist, I share this experience to shed light on unique considerations and successful strategies in doing community-based participatory research with youth at the margins.

Learning Curve: The Making of a New Researcher

Before this project, I did not consider myself a researcher. Truthfully, I held a very limited idea of what research could look like and what kind of person could do it. I considered my strengths community organizing, youth arts mentorship, and advocacy—working with people, not datasets. As a community advocate at the NW Network, I directly support survivors of domestic and sexual violence in their self-determination and safety. In the time leading up to this project, before the summer of 2016, most of my work was this direct support: kicking it at drop-in centers, facilitating support groups, collaborating with young people as they honed their strategies to survive and heal from violence.

When I was approached to coordinate and manage the Youth of Color Needs Assessment, I was nervous. I was 24-years-old at the time, technically a youth by our county's measures. I struggled to see a place for me or my skill sets to contribute to a research effort. With our small team of three, I sat across the table from foundations and regional policy leaders nearly twice my age to discuss the possibilities and limitations for this type of project. With a lean budget and demands for a quick turnaround, we started in June 2016. In over my head, our research and evaluation consultant, Dr. Carrie Lippy, offered me a crash course in participatory, community-based qualitative research. As it turns out, I would have to hit the ground running, keep up, and learn as we went.

Defining Roles, Building Community Infrastructure

First and foremost, we needed to expand our team to incorporate community relationships and feedback. Even before we ensured funding, we had begun reaching out to trusted community leaders to discuss the project and build support for the effort. We looked to organizers, youth workers, educators, elders, and change makers who would bring a breadth of perspectives from their distinct roles, backgrounds, and regions in King County. Within the first month, we established a core team of community partners who were prepared to weigh in and inform the research process at every stage from design and methodology to dissemination of the final report.

Shortly into our conversations with community partners and stakeholders, our team realized we had a unique opportunity to expand youth leadership in the project. While I was newer to this type of research, I leaned on my organizing and youth arts

mentorship background. I dedicated the next two months to recruiting a cohort of youth leaders to participate as additional advisors. Through community connections, I put out a call for youth of color who felt excited by the project and prepared for the time commitment. As part of a dynamic team, youth would be compensated well for their time and receive social justice focused job training and leadership development.

Youth showed immediate interest and almost 20 signed up for the positions. I hustled across the city to meet 16–24-year-olds in cafes and community centers to talk about the project. While many young folks were excited by the opportunity, the project required a high level of commitment: active participation, strong communication skills, the ability to move around the county independently, and critical thinking about social justice issues impacting youth of color in our region. As we named those expectations and began setting a calendar of meetings, our team solidified with eight core youth leaders, predominantly young women of color finishing high school, whose schedules aligned well for the full scope and uncertainty of this project that ultimately extended from six months to over a year. Different ages, neighborhoods, cultural backgrounds, and experiences with housing in/stability brought a rich depth of understanding and power to the team.

In my own life, mentorship has been a transformative and essential part of my survival and growth. In my role, it was essential to look out for our youth leaders and ensure their comfort and sustainability in the project. We prioritized compensating youth well for their expertise and support, paying them at the same $20 an hour rate that we paid our adult community partners. Like our adult community partners, the youth were advisors and thought partners, with each group playing an essential part in shaping the research. With the team's input, we decided to collect data through focus groups and a maximum variation purposive sampling strategy. While I was tasked with organizing and facilitating the focus groups, we would need co-facilitators and note-takers. Compassionate and well-connected, our youth leaders were naturally suited to move into these roles.

Affirming Learning Environment for Youth of Color Leadership

With this exciting opportunity in our hands, we had to bring care to preparing youth for such a high level of responsibility and ownership in the research. Recently, three of our youth leaders, Angela, Abla, and Karishama, met with me to reflect on their experiences with the YOC Needs Assessment. Like me, none of them had qualitative research experience before this project. "It was very different from what I thought research was," Angela shared; "I thought you would hand out a survey sheet [with] yes or no questions" (Ngo 2017). Being real with youth that we would be learning together through the process

helped create trust and connection when we first started. As Carrie helped build my skill to understand the role of a primary facilitator, we also fleshed out accessible teaching tools that broke down the essential concepts for our youth roles of co-facilitator and note-taker. With Carrie's support, I facilitated upwards of 10 hours of training for our youth leaders, including trauma-informed care, anti-oppression framework, facilitation skills, confidentiality, and note-taking techniques.

Despite the uncertainty at the outset of our project, our youth leaders felt comforted in joining a change-making team that centered their experiences and knowledge as youth of color. Angela shared how special it felt to be part of a team with a shared vision and goals:

> It just felt so comfortable, like this was meant for me. I really wanted to do something that felt meaningful and do non-profit work that I could see myself in… Everyone wanted to be there.… Everyone really wanted to be a part of this. (Ngo 2017)

Above all, I wanted the young folks on my team to know they could ask me anything, they could lean on me if the work felt too hard, and they could come to me for support if there were limitations or struggles in their personal lives.

Thankfully over time they took me up on this offer. Outside of our work hours throughout the project, I met with youth leaders who reached out about stress or confusion in their dating relationships, conflict with parents, concerns about a friend becoming isolated with a new boyfriend, college admissions essays, whatever was coming up. This ethic of care is intimately connected to the relationship between gender-based violence and homelessness. Building strong relationships with young people is not just about doing quality research or abstractly "empowering" youth. Nonjudgmental and compassionate support to problem solve is a major factor in both intimate violence and homelessness prevention. In fact, our YOC Needs Assessment speaks to this in the findings, reflecting the countless young who spoke at length to harmful and paternalistic dynamics with adults and service providers. Distressed by the transactional nature of many services, they overwhelmingly named a need for less formal mentorship from adults who had "been there." Youth seek spaces to safely discuss and learn from choices (especially mistakes) with a caring adult. In a relative position of power with the youth leaders, it was my responsibility to live these values. This kind of comprehensive care takes time and resources, but it was essential to building an effective team in a short time and created lasting, trusting relationships.

Our youth leaders live busy and stressful lives between school, jobs, and other responsibilities. Many of them run from one thing to the next and struggle to eat or sleep between. We needed to meet them with flexible and supportive structures that recognize these elements of their lives. We set clear

expectations for communicating about attendance and making up missed training time. In all these sessions, I focused on creating a fun and validating environment, one in which youth could ask questions and interrogate their own biases without judgement. Meeting at the NW Network's offices, we offered a warm, colorful space where youth of color see themselves reflected in the art and the literature. We started meetings by sharing food together, catching up and laughing over ice breakers. And, in the training, I ensured that we incorporated trust building exercises, interactive activities, and role plays to support different learning styles and active engagement.
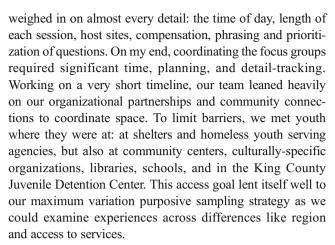
In addition to this, I offered flexible one-on-one support to each Youth Leader who wanted it. This allowed us to address lingering questions or specific anxieties before we started collecting data. The young folks on our team shared experiences of homelessness, racism, state and interpersonal violence with our participants; they were highly attuned to the sensitivity and pain associated with these realities. In our ongoing training, we honed skills to stay grounded in the room and embrace a variety of perspectives. But it was not without intentional care. This up-front time investment was integral to ensuring comfort for both our youth leaders and our youth participants.

As a young researcher, I continued to learn in tandem with the youth leaders. To combat shame and stigma as an advocate, it is essential to believe youth who come forward about violence and to validate their experiences of harm or suffering. While these are helpful strategies for trauma-informed support, they can present some challenges in a group research setting. With this in mind, Carrie and I paid attention to building my capacity for *compassionate neutrality*, or the skill to respond with care without conveying bias or preference toward some answers over others in a focus group setting. Co-learning, these were skills I shared and practiced with youth leaders as well. Karishama described this learning as a way to be supportive but not overpowering, to invite quieter participants in. It was sending a message, she said, that "this is *your* space. The facilitator asks the questions and makes sure we stay on topic but otherwise it was their space" (Vahora 2017). This capacity building—for our team to balance neutrality with grounded support—was integral to the success of our groups. These factors set a tone that says, *you don't have to say things a certain way, it's your voices we want to hear.*

Toward Trauma-Informed & Transformative Focus Groups

Built Environment

In our design, we focused our attention on keeping our focus groups trauma-informed and accessible. In those early summer meetings, our community partners and youth leaders weighed in on almost every detail: the time of day, length of each session, host sites, compensation, phrasing and prioritization of questions. On my end, coordinating the focus groups required significant time, planning, and detail-tracking. Working on a very short timeline, our team leaned heavily on our organizational partnerships and community connections to coordinate space. To limit barriers, we met youth where they were at: at shelters and homeless youth serving agencies, but also at community centers, culturally-specific organizations, libraries, schools, and in the King County Juvenile Detention Center. This access goal lent itself well to our maximum variation purposive sampling strategy as we could examine experiences across differences like region and access to services.

Because we hosted the focus groups in different physical spaces, it was especially important to focus on the built environment. "Having a comfortable environment really helps people open up," Angela explained in our interview, referencing how the built environment felt casual, not just a conference table "alone in a room with white walls" (Ngo 2017). When possible, we arranged to have one of our community partners available for additional emotional and logistical support day of. We offered full meals before groups and capped at a small group size of 15 youth to ensure everyone had time to talk if they wanted to. Angela shared that allowing participants to bring their children or support animals made a tangible difference in youth's ability to participate and feel welcome (Ngo 2017). These foundations set an important tone of communal care and accountability toward the wellbeing of our participants.

Liberatory Impact of Safe Space, Connection, & Youth Voice

One of our greatest successes in our project was a noticeably trauma-informed, safe, and empowering research setting. During the design phases, our community partners expressed the most concern about the impacts of discussing institutional and interpersonal violence in a group setting. They worried these conversations would overwhelm and destabilize youth participants. While built environment played a role in safety and comfort, we also prepared for the emotional impacts thoughtfully as a team. In many ways planning for the worst, we never anticipated how well youth would respond to the groups. In a confidential, trusting setting, participants opened up and built connection with each other. Even when youth took risks to discuss stigma, marginalization, and trauma—for example, trans youth in need of hygiene products or young Black women surviving sexual abuse—their peers were supportive and affirming. While it was not the intention of our groups, Karishama lit up remembering how special it was to witness youth of color frequently resource sharing: "someone is like, 'oh I was looking for a good women's shelter,' and

someone else is like 'oh I know one!'" (Vahora 2017). This kind of sharing speaks volumes to the power of creating safe spaces for youth, even within a research setting.

Investing in youth leadership not only increased the capacity of our youth leaders to do research in their communities, but their first-hand knowledge helped establish comfort and reduce power differentials at the focus groups. Reflecting on these roles, Angela emphasized the significance of "know[ing] people are going to understand and be there for your culture, your family dynamics, [so] there isn't that extra layer of judgement" (Ngo 2017). Karishama expanded on this idea, explaining:

Since the project was for people of color, it was really important you chose youth of color to be in that room. Often times when people "wanna help," they're people with power, people that are white or have never gone through these struggles and can't really understand it…. And this wasn't like that. We've all gone through our own struggles…. We were there for them as an organization, and we aren't gonna pressure you to say things you're not comfortable saying (Vahora 2017).

Despite being new to facilitation, our youth leaders were able to build upon their openness and desire to listen. Through ongoing training and support, they cultivated their skills in active, non-judgmental listening and a compassionate neutrality approach to conducting qualitative research. For many of our youth leaders, this meant deepening their understanding of strategies homeless and unstably housed youth may use to survive such as trading sex, doing drugs, or stealing. For some, it meant expanding their perspectives or values to make space for behaviors or experiences that they had previously judged or misunderstood.

Born from our own experiences with systems, our young team brought a reverence for human relationships and protecting the confidentiality of youth participants. We were able to integrate these values into the protocol for each group.

Some places want you to give up so much information, like your social security, but we were able to say this is 100% confidential, you don't have to give any information you don't want to. You can use any name you want to. People were into it! (Ali 2017).

Angela felt strongly that "acknowledging people as individuals" as they entered the room and filled out paperwork was an essential part of increasing the participants' comfort and sense of belonging (Ngo 2017). Our team valued the simple, respectful process for welcoming young people into the focus groups, reflecting on times from their own lives when they felt uncomfortable or fearful in a similar situation.

With these successes in mind, our focus groups clearly demonstrated greater need for confidential spaces for homeless and unstably housed youth to gather, share, and envision the supports they need. At many focus groups, participants spoke openly and freely about racism and poor conditions at shelters and housing programs, even when the group was housed in that very location. Youth participants trusted in confidentiality and took risks with the hope of impacting meaningful change. As a facilitator, this was a palpable feeling in the room. After we wrapped up a group, many participants would share excitedly about their positive experience, how good it felt to enjoy a comforting meal together, share their stories, and be recognized and paid for their expertise. Participants would ask: *When's the next one? Can I come back again? Can I have a flier for my friends? Will there be more opportunities to make recommendations after the report?* That enthusiasm, even in the face of pain and instability, underscores the importance of forums for youth of color to speak truth to power. And for us as a young research team, we found affirmation in knowing the spaces we poured so much care into were offering more than transactional data collection; they were creating a replicable model of powerful youth engagement and feedback for the region.

Trauma Stewardship as a Research Practice

Furthermore, Abla, Karishama, and Angela all reflected on the profound impact of bearing witness for the youth of color in our focus groups. For anyone exposed to the suffering of others—and especially for survivors of violence in support roles—a trauma stewardship practice is essential to sustaining oneself and preventing vicarious trauma. After each focus group, the Primary Facilitator would hold a short 30–40 min debrief session with the Co-Facilitator and Note-Taker. While we started this practice in service of our data collection—with a goal of summarizing the groups, identifying key themes, and noting any necessary adjustments—these debriefs also allowed our youth researchers to steward impacts of trauma exposure aloud with an adult advocate and move trauma through the body. The youth leaders described this as one of the most helpful and supportive components of our project's design. For Karishama, debriefing helped to build trust and allowed the youth leaders to metabolize what they were hearing in the groups.

We know each other, we're close to each other, so we can have these conversations. During the debrief it was easier for me to be like "yo that was hard" or "seeing one of the families argue outside, that hurt my heart." So that helped to get it all out (Vahora 2017).

This safe container to "get it all out" further protects confidentiality by decreasing isolation that can lead to sharing

information that feels too hard to hold alone. As an advocate and the primary support for our youth leaders, I loved this connection; it fostered strong mentor-mentee relationships and offered a unique opportunity for role-modeling resiliency and healthy boundaries with emotionally-taxing work.

For the Youth: Responsible & Accountable Data Analysis

As we moved through the Fall and Winter focus groups, we began shifting attention to analyzing the data we were collecting. As part of our participatory model, we convened our community partners and youth leaders at each phase of analysis to weigh in on the codes and preliminary findings. Karishama stressed the value of involving youth of color in this part of the research.

> I felt like compared to a lot of youth-centered projects … they can be tokenizing.… Sometimes they just do it for the face, like, "Oh we have youth on our team" And, I mean, I'm happy to do it, [laughing] but it's just to get them money or for them to look better. Sometimes they just edit down your work too" (Vahora 2017).

In contrast, we repeatedly and frequently checked-in, asked the group for guidance and feedback, and integrated it before we continued. In short, to actually have meaningful youth involvement, we have to value their perspectives as seriously as our adult community partners' and as seriously as our own. In this way, we were all able to collaborate as thought partners to produce findings and recommendations that accurately reflected the realities of homeless youth of color.

While the youth leaders had a big impact on our analysis and final report, many of them wished the participants could have played a bigger role in analyzing and sharing back the data after the groups. "It was a big responsibility," Karishama said, to carry forward their stories and try to represent their ideas. She worried aloud, "This is you guys. Is this accurate or what you want us to portray?" (Vahora 2017). As young people who know the feeling of misrepresentation and erasure, the youth leaders felt the weight of trying to "get the analysis right." Perhaps the greatest pressure felt by the youth leaders and the rest of our team was presenting back the findings to our funders and community stakeholders.

> I feel like I had a lot of responsibility on my shoulders because these people weren't there. And then looking back [to the focus groups] it's like, "Why are we here? Will there be change? Why are we doing this?" So then being in a space where there is power and money to actually make some change, I felt a lot of responsibility to tell them how it actually was (Ali 2017).

After countless stories of powerlessness and voicelessness in our focus groups, the youth leaders felt a burden to do right by their peers who could not be in the room. I shared this sentiment deeply. And unfortunately, because of confidentiality, we had collected virtually no contact information for group participants. And, with so much instability for youth experiencing homelessness, we struggled to even reach the youth who had shared their contact information to learn more about the report when it was ready. This could be an exciting area for growth in future community-based research efforts.

For Unlikely Researchers, a Lasting Impact

Community partnerships, like those developed through the YOC Needs Assessment, deepen and enrich our research so that it reflects the communities it intends to serve. As a young researcher and an advocate, I am honored and humbled to have been at the heart of this collaborative project. I am better advocate and a more critical data consumer because of it. For our community partners, it was clear at each stage—from focus groups to final report—that the findings reflected their longstanding work with homeless and unstably housed youth of color. From the outset, we hoped the YOC Needs Assessment would serve as an effective tool to help defend and drive their work. As a team, we set and met explicit goals to reach and hear from Black and native youth, whose voices are often obscured in conversations about youth of color in our region. For our community partners who lead within these specific communities, that data is especially significant. The YOC Needs Assessment demonstrates the possibilities for transformative, intergenerational relationship building in a research effort that continues to drive meaningful change in our region.

Above all, the youth leaders felt transformed in their perspectives on youth homelessness and the complexities of formal and informal supports. Angela, Karishama, and Abla each spoke at length about this, articulating issues impacting homeless folks in their schools and neighborhoods. Each shared a deepened understanding about the role communities and service providers play in showing up for youth who are struggling to find a safe and stable place to stay. For Abla, the YOC Needs Assessment informed her drive toward nursing, for Karishama toward public health, and for Angela toward mental health advocacy. For Angela, who is currently in a new internship, working to support youth of color with their mental health, she focuses on intersectionality. Applying learning from the YOC Needs Assessment, she described barriers undocumented youth face in accessing support and ways she hopes to show up for those unique experiences. Thinking toward her future, she would like a job at a community-based organization that balances both direct service and

research. Karishama, similarly, intends to build on this learning experience and connect it to her passions in public health:

> I am making sure my community is solid. […] I grew up here and I need to be that pipeline. I can't rely on other people to solve the issues that are impacting my community who aren't even from my community. […] I grew up in this messed up area and system and I need to be someone who fixes it. Not just by myself, but with other youth who are coming with me. But I need to be a leader in it, in a way that is respectful" (Vahora 2017).

The YOC Needs Assessment emphasizes the role of "by and for" solutions that communities of color have developed and cultivated to address and end youth homelessness. Our youth leaders are right there, following suit, and seizing opportunities to grow power within their communities.

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