

# COMMUNITY RESTRUCTURING AND THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH OF YOUTH: A STUDY OF A SMALL COASTAL COMMUNITY IN NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study which examined the health implications of community restructuring (social, economic, environmental, and industrial change) for youth living in a small coastal community in Newfoundland, Canada. Eleven focus groups with youth ages 13–24 ( $n = 74$ ) were conducted to obtain their perceptions on the impacts of the community restructuring that has occurred since the 1992 cod moratorium. Researcher observations over 5 visits were also part of the methodology. From the perspective of youth, significant losses have occurred within the community that have negatively affected their emotional and social health. At the same time, some aspects of the community have been relatively untouched by the changes and are reported to play a positive role in the youth's sense of well-being. However, current trends of youth leaving the community in search of economic stability may rupture these positive ties, which could have far-reaching negative implications as the youth move into adulthood.

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Globalization, or what is sometimes referred to as economic restructuring, has had an impact on countries around the world (Fraser et al., 2005; Marshall, 2001; McGrath, 2001). National policies and programs as well as the social, economic, political, industrial, and environmental conditions and structures within communities have all been affected by restructuring processes. McGrath (2001) has argued that the changes taking place in many rural communities in response to economic restructuring include a number of defining features: “the demise of primary sector employment in agriculture, fisheries and forestry; changing migration trends and demographic patterns; and interests in the countryside based on tourism, residential property and other lifestyle values” (p. 481). Kraack and Kenway (2002) note that “in many rural localities various processes of economic restructuring associated with globalization have led to high levels of unemployment, youth unemployment and ‘working poverty,’ and to social welfare becoming an important part of many local economies” (p. 149). In spite of such commonly identified features, however, one cannot assume a homogenous process. Restructuring is a dynamic process with complex interactions occurring at various environmental, institutional, and social levels, and it has been suggested that rural economic restructuring processes may have differential impacts on diverse populations in varied settings (Dolan et al., 2005; Fraser et al., 2005; Leach & Winson, 1995; Marshall, 2001).

In this study, we examine the impacts of economic restructuring on youth in a small, relatively isolated, coastal fishing community on the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. The study was part of the Coasts Under Stress research initiative, which analyzed how the availability of natural resources affects the functioning of communities and, in turn, the health and well-being of the residents. The changes taking place in the community in question are largely identified with the 1992 moratorium on cod fishing, although processes of change began to occur many years prior to the moratorium (Ommer & Turner, 2004). We focus on youth because, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Marshall, 2002; McGrath, 2001), much of the literature about community restructuring processes centres on adults even though, as MacDonald (1998) argues, teenagers and young adults have been, and continue to be, significantly affected by the changes, and the specific impacts on youth have long-term implications for the future of communities.

In exploring the impacts on youth, we were specifically interested in uncovering the health implications of community changes. Much of the current literature on economic restructuring stresses the social and economic changes taking place with little attention given to related health issues, despite an extensive body of health literature showing clear connections between social, economic, and political conditions, and the health and well-being of individuals and groups (Amick, Levine, Tarlov, & Walsh, 1995; Drukker, Kaplan, Feron, & Van Os, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 1997; Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003; Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). For example, there is a well-established body of literature pointing to the connections between socioeconomic status and health. This literature indicates that the rates of many diseases and disorders, including mental health problems such as depression, are higher among individuals with low socioeconomic status, as are numerous health-compromising behaviours (e.g., Amick et al., 1995; Leon, 2001). These higher rates are linked to the material and non-material (e.g., stress) conditions associated with lower socioeconomic status (Amick et al., 1995; Leon, 2001).

In addition, a growing body of literature is examining the connections between socioeconomic conditions and “place” in relation to health and health-related behaviours (e.g., Leon, 2001; Ross, 2002). Researchers have explored the multiple characteristics and features of place of residence that appear to be key in shaping individuals’ experiences, identities, and health and well-being (Altschuler, Somkin & Adler, 2004; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Drukker et al., 2003; Glendinning, Nuttall, Hendry, Kloep, & Wood, 2003; Matthews, Taylor, Sherwood, Tucker, & Limb, 2000). The role and characteristics of place may be especially salient during times of significant change such as the current period of restructuring in Newfoundland and Labrador (Gien, 2000; Ommer & Turner, 2004), particularly for youth who at this decisive point in their development process may be unusually receptive to social influences outside of their immediate family (Raymore, Barber, Eccles, & Godbey, 1999).

The literature on youth health issues is extensive, but much of it centres on “high-risk youth” and what are deemed “high-risk practices” (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1997; Harper & Carver, 1999). We know much less about the health and well-being of youth as a population (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). This relative void is due in part to the perception of youth as “notoriously healthy” compared to their adult counterparts who are experiencing age-related health conditions and disorders. Nevertheless, much of the known health disparities related to specific diseases and conditions start to develop during childhood and adolescence, even if they only manifest later in life (Graham, 2002; Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2001; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Recent research highlights the fact that youth often suffer from hidden emotional and mental health issues (Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003; Lohman & Jarvis, 2000; Schoon & Bynner, 2003), and are more disturbed by daily hassles than adults (Dumont & Provost, 1999). In addition, the earlier the onset of a depressive episode, the greater is the risk of recurrence (Ross, Ali, & Toner, 2003).

Given that research has begun to point to the magnitude of youth’s emotional health issues, a call has gone out to give “investigative priority” to youth and their emotional lives (Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. 828). It is for these reasons that our research focuses on the lives and experiences of youth and, in particular, the interconnections between their emotional and social health. Within the existing research literature, emotional or psychological health is often associated with levels of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Glendinning et al., 2003). Hutchinson et al. (2004) argue that psychological well-being is essentially a subjective construct, and that “people appear to derive an assessment of their own well-being using both external (social and environmental) as well as internal (personal) indicators” (p. 44). A diminished sense of emotional well-being is an indicator of poor health and is thought to contribute to unhealthy behaviours and lifestyle (Hutchinson et al., 2004).

Psychological or emotional health is also associated with social health, that is, with involvement in social relationships and networks that provide both objective and subjective (i.e., perceived) support (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; Springer, Parcel, Baumler, & Ross, 2006). Having friends and companions has been characterized as a central element of social support. According to Iso-Ahola & Park (1996, p. 170), “a need for companionship and friendship is one of the fundamental human needs that drives people to participate in shared activities. Such participation continues throughout the life cycle from children’s play to older adults’ leisure involvement.” Springer, Parcel, Baumler, and Ross (2006) note

that supportive social relationships operate both at an interpersonal level and at the level of the family, schools, and the community. At the community level, such relationships are seen as contributing to social cohesion as they are associated with features of the collective to which the individual belongs (Springer et al., 2006). Positive social relationships are not only important for one's emotional health, but are protective against stress-related illnesses and high-risk practices (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; Springer et al., 2006). According to Ross (2002), people who report ties to the community, as measured by the number of friends and acquaintances as well as volunteer and religious affiliations, "experience lower rates of death and disease compared with people without such links, even when taking into account differences in socioeconomic status, health behaviours and use of health care services" (p. 33).

In their work with British youth, Glendinning et al. (2003) found that positive self-esteem was linked with youth's perceptions of community life as supportive and caring; conversely, young people who felt that rural life was like "living in a gold-fish bowl" were more likely to report lower self-esteem and depressed mood (p. 145). Based on work with youth within a school setting, Springer et al. (2006) have also suggested that adolescents' sense of social connectedness and belonging appears to be associated with psychological well-being, augmenting the argument that there are interconnections between social connectedness and emotional health (p. 1637).

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This project was part of the Coasts Under Stress research initiative, which situates human health and well-being within a socioecological framework that assumes a dynamic, reciprocal, and ever-changing relationship between humans and their social, political, economic, and physical or natural environment (Dolan et al., 2005). Within this framework, some changes are viewed as potentially detrimental to various aspects of the socio-ecosystem and the health and well-being of individuals and groups; other changes are viewed as having little or no consequence; and still other changes are deemed to have some or great value. For example, changes in the availability of natural resources (e.g., fish, lumber) can negatively affect the economic functioning of communities, and the health and well-being of communities and the individuals who live in them, through such processes as increased stress stemming from a lack of employment opportunities. As people move away in search of employment, communities can shrink in size or even disappear, which in turn influences the ecosystem insofar as the natural environment is no longer inhabited and utilized by humans to the same extent. Alternatively, a decline in one economic initiative (e.g., fishing) may lead to the rise of other initiatives (e.g., tourism) that may have differential impacts on the natural environment through the creation of new types of infrastructure (e.g., ski trails, walking trails, tourist-related services and supports) and changing relationships between humans and the natural environment (e.g., pollution associated with tourism).

This qualitative research project is situated within a social constructivist paradigm, as we are exploring how youth understand community changes, and the meanings they associate with the impacts of the changes on their lives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We assume that among youth there are multiple and different perspectives on what the community changes mean and how they are experienced, and that there is no one "youth" view or rural youth view of the world (Matthews et al., 2000). We recognize that youth are a diverse group with differences in age, gender,

class, race, and so forth, and that there is no one rural voice even within the same community (Matthews et al., 2000). However, we suggest that there are some similar understandings or patterns of understanding and experience. We sought to capture and analyze these patterns by locating youth experiences and feelings within the context of the unique social, economic, political, and environmental situation of their community (Finlayson, 1994), as well as within the social context of “youth” who are entering into adulthood and making challenging life decisions. By understanding the processes through which the changing structures and conditions of a community affect the feelings, experiences, and behaviours of youth, we can begin to attend to the development of programs and policies that might offset some of the negative repercussions associated with such changes. Further, we can support and emphasize health-enhancing conditions that are often overlooked because of the typical focus on illness-producing processes.

## METHODS

As Popay et al. (2003) note, people’s stories are an effective means of exploring the perceived impacts of place on their feelings and experiences, and these stories have been used by researchers seeking to uncover how community economic restructuring influences youth’s career plans (Marshall, 2002). We chose focus groups as the method of gathering youth stories because such groups offer a forum for youth to debate and discuss issues, and react and respond to each other’s comments. Focus group questions were semistructured, with probes to ensure that key topics were covered in detail. Youth were prompted to consider both the negative and positive impacts of community changes; we did not want to assume, nor did we want the youth to assume, that only negative impacts were of interest. We asked youth to discuss key changes that had occurred in the past 5–10 years in their community, and whether or not the changes had affected what they do (e.g., health-related practices including involvement in physical activities such as sports), how they feel (i.e., their emotional lives), and their interactions with others (i.e., their social lives). We also asked them to discuss their future plans as we wanted to understand how community changes might be affecting how youth view their future in this community.

We recruited youth between the ages of 13 and 24 for the study. The term *younger youth* is used throughout this paper to refer to youth ages 13–17 who were in high school, while the term *older youth* refers to youth ages 17–24 who were attending college or no longer in school. To recruit younger youth, we sent letters to all parents of students attending the only high school in the community, informing them of the study and asking them to return the consent form if they did NOT want their child to potentially be randomly selected for participation. Names of students who returned a form were removed from the list by the school guidance counsellor. The principal investigator then developed a random sample of students from this list of approximately 230 students. Sampling was organized according to gender and grade. In total, 80 students were randomly selected and invited to participate through a consent letter sent to their parents or guardians. Students were contacted by telephone, and interested students who had parental/guardian consent were invited to a focus group held at the school outside of school hours (e.g., at lunch time). Eight focus groups were conducted with 49 students—29 young women and 20 young men. We organized the focus groups by grade and gender because key

informants in the school argued that this grouping would be the most effective way to facilitate open and honest discussion. The size of the focus groups ranged from 3 to 9 participants, and light refreshments were served.

To recruit youth ages 17–24, posters were displayed at the only local college in the community, and investigators spoke to classes about the research. Three focus groups were conducted at the college, involving a total of 25 participants—20 women and 5 men—with 8–9 participants in each group. These groups were mixed groups of both young men and women. Participants received a small honorarium to offset any costs associated with attending. Light refreshments were served.

All focus groups were conducted in a space that ensured confidentiality, and lasted between 1 and 1¾ hours. All participants were provided with a written list of resources that they could access if needed (e.g., a local social worker, a toll-free help crisis phone number). The younger youth were also encouraged to access the high school guidance counsellor.

In addition to the focus groups, one-on-one key informant interviews ( $n = 20$ ) were conducted with adults in the community who work with youth in various capacities. We sought to interview key informants who might have different perspectives based on the type of service or support they provide to youth (e.g., teachers, a pastor, a police officer, social service and health care professionals). Recruitment was based on a snowball technique where one key informant provided names of others working with youth. Key informants were provided with a small honorarium.

The research also included a “micro-ethnography” (Berg, 1998) as various members of the research team spent time in the community to gain an understanding of the local culture. One of the researchers is from Newfoundland, and a second researcher had lived and worked for a period of time on the island. Two of the researchers visited the community on five different occasions from 2001–2004, for 4–7 days each time. They collected much of the data together with student assistants, one of whom was from Newfoundland. During these visits they participated in local activities and fairs, and had numerous informal conversations with community members. Two young adults from the community who knew members of the research team spent time with the researchers, and on occasion drove them to community events.

While in the field, written journal notes were taken and became part of the data set. The notes included summaries of informal conversations with community members and descriptions of community events. In addition, secondary sources of information about the community (e.g., unpublished municipal reports) were collected. Handouts briefly outlining the research, written in lay terms, were provided to any interested parties. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the appropriate ethics committees at the universities of the investigators, and provided to a regional community ethics committee for information and consideration.

All focus groups and interviews were audiotaped, and the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by experienced transcribers. Transcripts were read and re-read for common codes, and members of the research team discussed the codes until agreement on a coding structure was reached. Coding of the transcripts was carried out using the QSR NUD\*IST software program. The codes were analyzed for key themes. Reports of the major themes and subthemes were prepared, read and re-read, compared

and contrasted, and further analyzed for key concepts and ideas as per the techniques outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1998). Preliminary analyses of the data were developed based on the focus groups, together with journal notes taken in the field and researcher reflections and discussions that occurred over an extended period of time.

The preliminary analyses were presented at the local high school to interested students for their feedback.<sup>1</sup> The feedback sessions provided an opportunity for students to provide input into the researchers' analyses and to discuss the findings with their peers. The research team further analyzed the data following these sessions, and communicated the results at two presentations in the community and at multiple presentations in other communities in the area.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

The youth reports (based on focus groups with 74 youth), together with journal notes taken while in the community and secondary literature about the community, form the basis of this paper. Quotes from the focus groups are identified as being from younger or older youth, and the younger youth are further identified by gender because focus groups with that age group were organized by gender. The quotes are the words of the youth and represent their expressions and ways of speaking.

### **The Community: A Brief Overview**

The 1992 cod moratorium, which was the result of a number of interrelated forces including overfishing and unmonitored climate change (Dolan et al., 2005), was the main catalyst for numerous community changes. Following the moratorium, the demographic composition of the community was altered as many families and individuals left in search of work,<sup>2</sup> while other families and individuals from smaller communities moved in due to the withdrawal of services and schools in outlying areas. In spite of this in-migration, government statistics suggest that the population declined. Statistics are not collected for the exact geographical area that covers the community, but the data that are available (and that include most of the community) indicate that from 1996 to 2001 the total population declined by 12.1%, with a 14.3% decline among 15–19-year-olds and a 31.9% decline among 20–24-year-olds (Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency, 2004).

Many of the youth we spoke to reported that prior to the moratorium, their community of over 3,000 people was “booming.” They noted that fishing was a key source of income for many, and several fishing-related services also contributed to the vibrancy of the community's economic life. Youth indicated that there were many “good” stores that allowed residents to shop locally, and a very active health services sector utilized not only by local residents but also by surrounding communities. A formal health services sector remains in the community, but it has been downsized and there are constant government threats of further cutbacks, fuelling concerns about the continued existence of health care services in this location. A few restaurants, a small selection of other stores and services, and a small shopping centre also remain, but most residents shop for clothes and household goods outside of the community because of the decline in the commercial sector.

As the fishing industry declined, tourism was called upon to fill the void. However, because of the long, severe winters (lasting from November to April or May), the summer tourist season is short

(Palmer & Sinclair, 1997). There is still some fishing, especially for shrimp and crab, and some fish processing in the local factory, but the community's relationship to the natural environment is less about natural resource use and more about tourism. As one youth commented,

Because when like I was a bit younger you noticed a scattered tourist you see around, but now it's like big old great big buses, Greyhound buses and motor homes is everywhere. And every second machine you sees—buses and motor homes is everywhere. And every second machine you sees in the summer got a foreign license plate on it, right? (Younger youth, males)

It is within this context of significant community changes, and an alteration in the community's relationship to the physical or natural environment, that youth spoke to us. Two main conceptual themes emerged from the data analysis and provide an organizing structure for the findings. The first theme, "What restructuring has taken away or changed," incorporates the youth's discussion of losses and changes in the community in the recent past. Much of the conversation under this theme was about the way "things used to be." The second theme, "What remains the same in spite of restructuring," speaks to what has *not* been fundamentally changed in spite of the decline of the fishing industry and its ripple effects. The "losses" and "changes," as well as talk of what "remains the same," are presented in terms of the impacts on youth, with much of the discussion centring on youth's social and emotional health.

### **Theme 1 – What Restructuring Has Taken Away or Changed**

**Through the eyes of youth: Loss of a way of life.** In all focus groups, youth spoke at length about the loss of a way of life as a result of the cod moratorium. They commented that for generations families had based their economic existence on fishing, and on services and industries related to fishing. Many youth, particularly young men, traditionally received hands-on training in the fishery. The fishing industry and the fishing plant have historically been central to community identity. When reflecting on the loss of this way of life, however, most youth spoke in the third person, separating themselves from adults who were economically dependent on the fishery, and who were being "forced" to recreate their identities, discover new means of supporting themselves, and in many instances leave their homes in search of work.

Fishing was so built into their culture, and then to have it just gone one day, it's just kind of sad. [The adults] don't know much else. (Younger youth, males)

Basically, you got to start over. Back, say, in 1989, before the fishery moratorium, people had their homes and they was happy and comfortable, but like you were saying, people's going away to school now, they got to uproot and get a new home, start a new life, basically. And that's kind of hard for someone who's 40 years old to do, right? (Younger youth, males)

In contrast to adults who suffered an immediate economic impact on their employment, youth saw their future economic lives and employment affected. Although some jobs remain in the local fish factory, in tourism-related positions, and in the service sector, a number of youth argued that work within these fields is unstable, often seasonally based, and low paying. A few youth spoke of young men who were able to find work "offloading fish" or "pumping gas," but these were defined as "poor jobs;" the few "good" local jobs were perceived as being reserved for adults. There was a general feeling that most youth would have to leave the community and the area in order to obtain good stable work.

But it's hard on younger people, I think, because I would love to be able to live here. I loves it here, but there's nothing here for me to do. You can't get neither job here. If you do, you're really, really lucky. Yeah, really. It's lucky if you can get a student job around here in the summer time. (Younger youth, females)

A post-secondary education was perceived by many youth as essential in order to access "good jobs away," and they were optimistic about obtaining the needed post-secondary education that would allow them to be more marketable than the previous generation. There was talk of how adults within the community who did have a formal education were "better off" because they could adapt and respond to the changing economic situation and variable market conditions.

The discussion about the cod moratorium was not, however, solely about economics or the loss of income and a way of life. The cod moratorium went far beyond economics, and was linked to one's mental and emotional health and well-being, and the "mood" within the community.

*Respondent:* I think there's a lot of depression, because everyone is looking for a job and nobody can't find anything and trying to support their families.

*Facilitator:* Is that the older generation?

*Respondent:* Yeah, I'd say. (Younger youth, females)

Feels like the community's dead, to me. People just don't care any more.

I feel like just as well to stay home and watch TV, it would be more fun than to go out to that. Like everyone's too depressed. (Younger youth, males)

**Educational resources and opportunities: Losses and challenges.** From the point of view of many of the youth, the cod moratorium has affected not only their future work and place of residence, but its ripple effects have also altered the quality of their current education. Some high school students, for example, argued that the variety of courses needed to ensure a quality education was not being offered because of declining enrolment as more and more families leave the community. Others contended that young high school teachers with "fresh new ideas" are not coming to, or staying at, the school because the community is no longer an attractive place to live.

The widespread belief that youth in this community are relatively disadvantaged in terms of their education, combined with the costs of post-secondary education, was creating considerable stress for those who wanted to go to college or university. "There's a lot of stress here. Yes, a lot of stress. Boy, yes. We're all looking at going to university and stuff. Our parents don't really make enough to give us money to go to university, so we got to go out and get this big old loan. Get out of school, after all this hard work, you got to pay it all back—\$50–60,000, that's a lot" (Younger youth, males). Fear and trepidation about leaving the security of the community to pursue a post-secondary education appeared to compound the stress. "Leaving from a small community like this and going to a larger population, it's a little bit different getting around in a city. . . . You get nervous not knowing what to expect" (Younger youth, males).

**Changing connections to peers, and loss of leisure and recreational opportunities.** One of the most significant impacts of the moratorium for youth, and an area that clearly has important implications for their social and emotional health, is the change in their peer relationships. A number of youth

have seen friends move away with their families in search of work and other opportunities. “I had a friend move away there, um, last year. And, well, he was one of my really good friends and he had to move away cuz like I think his dad lost his job. So they had to move up to Goose Bay because of cutbacks and everything around here” (Younger youth, males).

With fewer and fewer youth in the community, some young people observed that they have little choice about who becomes their friend. They explained that they “hang out” with whoever is around. Youth of all ages often spend time together, resulting in younger youth becoming involved in age-inappropriate activities such as smoking and drinking.

So, first of all, why are they [younger youth] starting [to smoke] so young? They sees the older crowd doing it, and they wants to try it. Think it’s cool. Yes, right. We’re such a small community, there’s not a lot of segregation between younger people and older people. If you only hung around with people your age, you wouldn’t see that many people. And in communities like out around [name of place] and down towards [name of place] there’s no segregation. There’s kids 6 and 7 playing with kids 18 and 19 years old because there’s just no one else to hang around with or whatever. (Younger youth, males)

The cod moratorium was also linked to a visible reduction in organized youth-centred recreational opportunities. There has been a loss of youth participants and youth organizers of common-interest leisure events, as well as a loss of adults who previously had played a crucial role in the volunteer sector in overseeing and coaching youth activities. Sports, especially hockey, were discussed as very “big” in the community, while other types of interests were of lesser importance. “You can be busy with sports, fairly busy, but if you’re into music and stuff, there’s not a whole lot there” (Younger youth, males). Although the costs of participating in organized sports were probably beyond the means of some families even before the cod moratorium, there were suggestions that these costs were increasingly a barrier to involvement.

Many of the youth admitted that they were bored, and attributed their boredom in part to the relative lack of organized or structured leisure activities. Indeed, boredom was a common refrain in all of the focus groups. “We’re bored. Yes. Nothing to do” (Younger youth, males). Boredom was connected to what restructuring has taken away, and the lack of resources to develop more youth-centred activities; it was also linked with “trouble” and excessive drinking, especially among young men in the community although not exclusively so.

It used to be a lot better. . . . There used to be a pool table, couch [in the place they hung out], and a little, it’s like a band, not like now. Yeah, like a dance there every weekend but like after they closed that down teenagers never really had anything to do around town, just get in trouble. Yeah [giggles]. (Younger youth, males)

I think back then [before the cod moratorium] they [youth] had more stuff to do and there was more people around. They had like, I don’t know, more places to go and stuff like that. When you were younger anything you’d do, you’d have more fun doing it, but now there’s nothing for you to do but drink to have a good time. Yeah, like we used to go outdoors and just stand up and have a good time, but now if we’re not drinking, then it’s no point in going outdoors. Yeah. (Younger youth, females)

## Theme 2 – What Remains the Same in Spite of Restructuring

**Safety, security and a healthy lifestyle: Some of the best parts of life are right here.** While youth discussed many of the losses associated with restructuring, and related stressors and unhealthy practices, at the same time they described their community as a “healthy” place to live. These healthy aspects were connected to a number of qualities that were not lost, or at least not fundamentally affected by changes related to the cod moratorium. Many youth believed, for example, that they were physically safe from “thieves and robbers” because of the isolation of the community. Despite the rise in tourism in recent years, the community was spoken of as being relatively untouched by “dangerous people.” As one older youth commented, this community is not like “cities away” where youth are “going out every Friday and Saturday night and always meeting up with freaks and psychos.”

Feeling emotionally comfortable with neighbours was also seen as a positive, healthy aspect of the community. As one older youth commented, people in the community “aren’t afraid to know each other.” Although some youth felt at times as though they were “living in a fish bowl,” they saw their community as a supportive place. This feeling persisted despite the out-migration and loss of connections that had occurred. One youth indicated that this comfortableness was noticed only after being away and coming home. “When you see what it’s like [in larger cities], when you get back here, it’s too comfortable to leave again, I think” (Older youth).

Many youth, especially older youth who have lived elsewhere for a period of time, viewed the lifestyle of large urban centres as unhealthy as opposed to the healthy living in their community where people experience less stress, access locally produced food, and can afford a home despite the lower incomes.

You may as well be back here getting \$300 a week. At least you got a bit of time to yourself. Yeah, like \$20 an hour up there [in Ontario] is like our \$6 or \$8 an hour here. You got a lot of people around here they haven’t got so much money, but most people own their own home, right? (Older youth)

**The great outdoors.** Although many youth were adamant that their future economic lives lay in places “far away,” they also spoke about what they would lose by leaving their community. The conversation often vacillated between wanting to leave and wanting to stay. Living in a place where they can enjoy the freedom and excitement of numerous outdoor leisure activities, especially in the winter-time, was a common example of how their current lives were positively associated with good health and well-being. This healthy way of life was juxtaposed to life in large urban settings with little access to expansive outdoor spaces. Young men, in particular, spoke enthusiastically about their attachment to the land—to the physical landscape, the ocean, and the wildlife—and what these ties mean for their health and well-being.

To me, just personally, [the community has] got a nice bit to offer because I do a lot outdoors, hunting and fishing and snowmobiling and that kind of stuff, and it’s just unlimited places to go and do it. That’s the biggest reason I like it here—stuff you wouldn’t get other places. You’d miss it too much. You can’t take a shotgun and go kill a couple of ducks in downtown Toronto. No, that’s for sure.  
(Younger youth, males)

Some of the youth, both young men and women, stated that although they would be seeking work outside of the community, they planned to return on a regular basis or to resettle in the community

after retirement. One younger youth commented on the mobility back and forth of an older friend as a “way of life.”

I’ve got a buddy, he’s like he’s a bit older than what I am—he’s 20, 21 something like that, right—he’s never got no education other than grade 12. And he went out to Ontario sandblastin’ and he came home and draws his unemployment for as long as he could and when he ran out of unemployment he went out west like way out to Alberta or somewhere looking for a job and now he’s in the bush working on a pipeline with the rigs. (Younger youth, males)

Some youth felt that they could not really fit in another setting or be “whole” in an urban community, and this feeling was discussed as a key factor in people continually returning to the community. “Me, I’ve been to quite a few places out west and, you know, all around Atlantic Canada. But I always keep coming back though for some reason. I just can’t fit in anywhere else” (Older youth). One young woman commented, “I always liked the fact that I’d always be able to come back here. Yeah, because it’s so quiet here. Like in the wintertime, if I can’t get on the skidoo, I’ll go crazy.” Another echoed, “Same here. Like getting a whole bunch of people and going to the [name of place] and then going for a boil up and then going just riding around everywhere. Loves it. Yeah, that would be a big miss in the city for sure” (Younger youth, females).

Many youth viewed winter as an especially joyous time because they could snowmobile and enjoy outdoor activities in spaces far away from adult supervision. Indeed, the snowmobile is important not only as a mode of transportation during the winter when the community experiences heavy snowfalls, but it also represents a part of the youth culture. Almost all youth have a snowmobile or access to one. As one young man commented, “I’d say skidooing is probably the biggest pastime around here.”

Well, as far as I knows, almost everyday after school, everybody goes home and puts a couple of dollars worth of gas in their machine and meets at this place down, it’s called the [name of place]. Everybody meets down there and usually parks and stuff. It’s just somewhere to go on the skidoo. But on the weekends, I think people gets in groups and they do have a specific point you go to. You might go to somebody’s cabin. (Younger youth, females)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Increasingly, researchers are attempting to unravel the mechanisms or pathways through which local or community-level structures, resources, and norms influence individuals’ health and well-being, and the health of different subpopulations. Our study sought to add to this literature by investigating how youth perceive a changing community environment and its influence on their health and well-being. We chose to explore the impacts of community change on youth, focusing on potential health implications, because community changes may be especially critical at this key juncture in identity formation. Youth are in the process of separating from adult authority and forging their job/career, educational, and adult paths. Moreover, youth are the “future” of communities currently undergoing restructuring; how youth are affected and respond to the changes will influence their decision of whether or not to remain in the community in the years ahead.

Findings from our study indicate that youth perceive recent community-level changes as having a significant impact on their lives in the present *and into* the future. They perceive their current lives as

shaped most poignantly by loss—fewer places to “hang out,” decreased resources for youth-centred recreational activities, reduced quality of their education, the loss of friends and families who have moved away, and a less than happy community mood. They see their future lives, too, affected by the loss of local employment opportunities and by the prospect of leaving in search of good jobs or higher education.

Increased stress was one of the key health problems raised by youth in response to these community changes. The high level of stress reported by the focus group participants is consistent with the finding in a survey of 1,400 Newfoundland and Labrador youth that a greater percentage of teens are reporting stress today than in 1990 (Westera, Bennett, & Dawe, 2004). Dumont and Provost (1999) have argued that the day-to-day stress that youth experience may be far more significant than often recognized. Our research suggests that youth in this community are struggling not only with the day-to-day, “normal” stressors related to this stage of development, but also with added layers of stress caused by the considerable changes in their community that are affecting what they do, their opportunities and resources, and where they might live in the future.

The losses reported in terms of leisure and recreational opportunities, and friends moving away, raise specific concerns about youth’s social and emotional health, and point to the need for prevention strategies. Leisure and recreation offer youth opportunities to develop their identity, relieve stress, and to learn necessary social skills. Without these opportunities, youth have fewer avenues for optimal social and emotional development. Even the reduction in commercial services could have serious implications for the emotional and social health of youth as these services are hubs of social interaction or what is referred to as the “mutually reinforcing nexus between social and commercial activity” (Fraser et al., 2005, p. 159). Within the North American context, adolescence is typically a period when individuals spend much more time with peers than with parents (Kurz, 2000), and peer relationships therefore take on tremendous importance. In a community where the quantity and diversity of recreational and leisure activities are lacking, and where there are fewer and fewer teens and young adults, youth have fewer opportunities for age-appropriate social interactions and social development, and fewer possibilities of meeting a partner with whom they might share their adult life (Laegran, 2002). These losses are clearly affecting how youth feel, and what they do, and have far-reaching implications for their future lives.

The youth in our study did not speak about being physically unhealthy, which is not surprising given that, as the literature suggests, they are at a particularly healthy stage of the life cycle in terms of physical wellness (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). Nevertheless, certain activities, such as heavy drinking, were presented by some of the youth as “unhealthy,” and were associated with an underlying social condition: boredom. The boredom was linked in turn to recent losses in their community. Youth connected their unhealthy practices with social conditions within their community, specifically the reduced options for leisure and recreational activities. This finding suggests that changing the local community context to better suit the needs and diverse interests of youth might alter this potentially high-risk activity although, as some researchers suggest, leisure boredom may be both a cause *and* an effect of substance abuse (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991, p. 269).

Given the potential complexity of the relationship between boredom, leisure, and excessive drinking, more research is needed to explore the historical, cultural, and other social forces that may be

shaping drinking patterns, especially but not exclusively among young males. The reported stress and uncertainty about future employment may be another factor influencing drinking patterns for young men who otherwise would have entered the fishing industry; however, more research is needed to determine the extent of the reported drinking problem and potential forces influencing such practices. Our research was not able to assess either the extent or exact nature of the drinking practices as our findings are based on reports of a problem rather than the study of the nature and determinants of drinking practices.

Castro and Lindbladh (2004) suggest that young people growing up in areas where there are high levels of unemployment may think there is no reason to pursue education since there will be “no work after all,” and that this way of thinking might increase their risk of marginalization or “socio-spatial” exclusion, creating “a profound social suffering that in the long run may have an influence on health, if not directly through poor material conditions, then indirectly, through ‘psycho-social pathways’” (p. 161). However, in our study we found that many youth are keen to pursue their post-secondary education and are confident that this will lead to a good paying job elsewhere. Indeed, many emphasized formal education as a “ticket to success,” and there was a sense of agency and control vis-à-vis their ability to obtain good jobs “away.” The “social space” of these youth extends beyond their community and the surrounding communities; consequently, they are able to envision themselves accessing employment in the future.

Whether or not these hopes will materialize into good jobs in other locations remains to be seen, but many youth are clearly aware that educational qualifications shape socioeconomic position in adulthood. Youth have witnessed the emotional toll that unemployment has taken on adults and are focused on creating a different future for themselves. Many youth also appear to understand that there is a relationship between socioeconomic position and mental health (Graham, 2002); as Hutchinson et al. (2004) observe, “depression and the resultant low level of psychological well-being has been shown to decrease the chance of obtaining and maintaining employment.” Youth have seen in adults that unemployment is a key factor in depression and vice versa.

A few youth did argue that education and a good job elsewhere, although important for a variety of reasons, are obtained at a cost because it means a loss of ties to the physical safety, social connectedness, landscape, and outdoor activities that exist in their community. Nevertheless, many youth do not intend to relinquish these healthy aspects of their community should they leave in search of economic security. The space outside of the community is viewed not as a one-way road leading away but as a “vast complexity of interconnections” with a great deal of mobility back and forth (Massey, 1993). Many plan to return for shorter or longer periods of time, and remain connected to this local place through resident family and friends.

In their research with British youth, Matthews et al. (2000) found that few rural children reported playing in woods, fields, or near rivers, either on their own or with friends. In contrast, a common refrain among the youth in our study was that “in the backwoods” was a key place to socialize with other youth away from adult interference. These different findings may be in part a product of the fact that we interviewed youth 13–24 years of age, while Matthews et al. (2000) interviewed youth 9–16 years who are more likely to require adult ties and supervision. The differences may also be linked to

the lack of indoor spaces for youth in the community that we studied, as well as to a cultural history that involves a strong relationship with the outdoors, the sea and the natural environment. The involvement in outdoor leisure activities suggests some important health benefits as existing research links active living to improved physical functioning, positive mood enhancement, and lower mortality (Iwasaki, MacKay, MacTavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006). Moreover, it has been found that engaging in active leisure helps people to cope with stress and find meaning or a sense of belonging (Iwasaki et al., 2006).

Matthews et al. (2000) suggest that few youth in their study participated in outdoor leisure activities because spaces were fenced off by adults into private lands (p.144). By comparison, youth in our study spoke of outdoor spaces that were more or less *their* spaces—where all the youth would congregate and adults knew the spaces were youth spaces. Such feelings of ownership in a context where indoor spaces for youth are lacking may contribute greatly to the youth's sense of control, which in turn may positively affect their emotional health. Current research contends that young people often want adventurous environments where they can experience safe dangers (e.g., Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1993), and our study supports this finding. Many youth in this community expressed a strong desire and need for these types of activities, particularly outdoors. Such activities may alleviate the stress they are feeling and represent a form of escape from the stressors (Abbot-Chapman & Robertson, 2001).

Much of the literature on attachment to place centres on adults, perhaps because adults have had more time to develop this attachment (Pretty et al., 2003); however, our research suggests that youth, too, have a strong attachment to place that is central to their feelings of wellness and perception of identity. Our study indicates that their lives are filled with positive emotional attachments even as they experience periods of boredom, stress, and unhappiness. The “rural idyll” may be experienced even if it does not permeate every moment of their lives (Matthews et al., 2000).

Given this attachment to place, our research points to the need to investigate ways to assist youth who desire to stay in their community. The long-term health consequences of ignoring these ties to community and place may be significant not only for the individuals themselves, but also for their families and friends. Indeed, not addressing the health-enhancing aspects of these attachments may result in the very depression that many youth are attempting to avoid.

At the same time, attention needs to be given to addressing the emotional and social health of youth who *do* want to move away and experience life in a new place. There is research suggesting that the maintenance of recreation and leisure practices developed in childhood within the cultural context of family and community may be important in maintaining the self-esteem of youth (Yu & Berryman, 1996). For youth from rural places (such as the site of this study) who move to urban centres, continued involvement in active outdoor recreation as well as relationships with other Newfoundlanders—people who share similar cultural norms and values—may be important factors in maintaining their emotional health. Supporting these social and recreational needs as youth move to a new community may prove to be a key prevention strategy.

Leisure can be an important context in which youth experiment with roles that contribute to their sense of community belonging, and research suggests that this sense of belonging is essential to youth's

social and emotional health (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Hemmingway, 1999; Woolcock, 1998). However, a sense of belonging requires sustained and stable opportunities to engage in community activities and celebrations (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). Youth may find it difficult to connect in such a sustained manner if they migrate to new communities for longer or shorter periods of time or remain in communities where drastic changes have reduced the availability of community-based volunteer, leisure, and recreational opportunities. Working with youth to develop and implement policies and programs that address their recreational and leisure needs, and their sense of community belonging—in “home” communities where such opportunities are diminishing, as well as in communities to which they are moving—is a crucial area for health promotion and may be fundamental to ensuring the health of youth now and in the future.

### NOTES

1. At the feedback sessions, students asked that the issues they raised in the research be presented in the form of a video. As a result, the research team prepared an additional proposal and ethics application for the production of a video. The video presents some of the ideas raised in the research but is a separate project.
2. According to Kennedy (1997), the 1992 cod moratorium left approximately 20,000 people jobless in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in 1993 when the moratorium was extended, the numbers rose to 30,000. Some have suggested that 40,000 jobs in the fishery were lost in the 1990s, with additional job losses in tertiary employment (Dolan et al., 2005).

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article expose les résultats de l'étude qualitative que nous avons menée pour évaluer les implications, sur le plan de la santé des jeunes vivant dans une petite communauté côtière de Terre-Neuve, au Canada, des changements sociaux, économiques, environnementaux et industriels survenus depuis quelques années dans la région.

Grâce à 11 groupes de discussion (âge des participants : de 13 à 24 ans,  $n = 74$ ), nous avons recueilli la perception qu'ont les jeunes des impacts de la restructuration qu'a subie leur communauté depuis le moratoire sur la pêche à la morue décrété en 1992. De plus, des membres de l'équipe de recherche ont séjourné à 5 reprises pendant quelques jours dans la communauté pour en tirer des observations supplémentaires.

Selon les témoignages des jeunes participants, les pertes significatives qui sont survenues dans la communauté ont une influence négative sur leur santé émotive et sociale. Les jeunes constatent également que certains aspects de la vie de la communauté ayant subi relativement peu de changements ont une influence positive sur leur bien-être. Cependant, comme les jeunes ont de plus en plus tendance à quitter la communauté dans l'espoir de trouver ailleurs une plus grande stabilité économique, ces éléments positifs sont menacés, et cela pourrait avoir des effets négatifs importants sur la vie des jeunes de la communauté au moment où ils arriveront à l'âge adulte.

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