

ENGAGING YOUTH IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the question of ‘how to engage youth in civic participation?’ This study was necessary because youth as a vulnerable population are often marginalized and excluded from meaningful participation in society. Civic participation is defined and addressed in varying ways in the literature. The exploration into the topic of civic participation in this research is important as to directly involve the youth and give space for them to explore and express their own definitions and conceptions of civic participation, as well as major obstacles preventing them from participating. This study attempted to explore the complexity of youth participation. What are the youth really interested in? What prevents them from participating? What are their concerns? Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in order for the researcher to delve into the difficulties and experiences of the youth participants in civic participation.

This report provides a summary of the existing literature on engaging youth in civic participation. In the findings and discussion section I will highlight two major aspects for critical examination. The first is the discourse on youth civic participation, which included, definition of youth civic participation; how does youth participate; the meaning attached to youth; and how to engage youth? The second issue is the discrepancies between the existing understanding of the barriers to youth civic participation in society. This study points to the fact that a common, or widely acceptable definition of civic participation does not exist in the academic literature or other forms of literature. The findings also suggest that existing definitions tend to be elitist and do not reflect the everyday lived experiences and realities of youth and their community involvement. The report then emphasizes three critical implications for social work research. First, in-depth interviews should be used more often in conducting research on youth civic participation so that they could share their experience and ideas in less restrictive ways. Second, the present elitist definitions of civic participation should not be imposed on youth. Last but not least, youths’ definitions of community should be included in the conversations on civic participation.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the question of ‘how to engage youth in civic participation?’ Why is this study necessary? As a vulnerable population, youth are marginalized as they are often left out of meaningful participation in society (Lee, Sammon, and Dumbrill, 2004). Marginalized groups’ way of knowing is not always considered in mainstream research. Including youth as participants in this research will help to legitimize their knowledge and life experiences. Society expects that civic participation will help youth overcome their marginalization because it will give voice to the issues that affect them within society. Talking directly and inclusively to youth will enable us to understand their motivations for and against participation. It will allow us to see how the youth define civic participation, what are their feelings, thoughts and ideas on the issue and how they would like to proceed in addressing the issue. As a young woman of colour, I am also interested in how gender and race is related to age in participation. This will be done by comparing and contrasting the responses of participants who are male and female, white and youth of colour with each other. I will look for similarities and differences in their responses and examine if there are any significant findings and/or conclusions.

Research Questions

The research was conducted in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Hamilton. Toronto has seen a growing interest in programs and initiatives to engage youth (Toronto

Youth Cabinet, 2004; Youth Service Canada, 2005; and City of Toronto, 2000). This is seen in light of the recent increase in gun crimes and violence among the city’s youth (Watson, 2006).

I am interested in this topic not only because of my personal experiences with this population, but also because of my interest in youth as a marginalized population. In my volunteer and work experiences, I have come across youth who showed great interest in participating in different project activities. For example, I encountered youth who had many excellent ideas as to how to combat and fight racism within their communities. Many were excited at being able to contribute to developing a youth-led anti-racism network. Most did not know there were opportunities, like this network, through which their ideas could be explored and implemented. The fact that these youth were excited about the prospect of such an activity and eager to get started, speaks volume about the need to reach out to youth and engage their participation in civic affairs in society.

The research explores the following questions:

1. How does youth define civic participation?
2. What does it mean to engage youth?
3. Why do youth participate and why are some not participating?
4. What are the possible solutions to effective youth civic participation?

The research is grounded on these questions. The first question explores the youths’ understanding of civic participation and the ways in which they would define the topic. The literature will show that there are varying conceptions of civic participation and I would like to see if youth identify with these different definitions and conceptions. The second question tries to understand the engagement of youth and what this

engagement looks like. The third question seeks to understand the reasons why some of the youth are participating but the other are not. If youth are not participating, then what are the barriers that may be preventing them from doing so? The final question is to identify the possible solutions that may be employed to engage youth in civic participation. Furthermore, the question seeks to establish whether or not youth are interested in being engaged in civic participation.

The youth should be the best judge of their civic participation and how they would like to be engaged. Too often we assume that when people find out about the society around them, they would want to participate in it to make it fair and better. Too often we have this assumption, but do not know enough about the issue. Some people feel that having access to education is one way of finding out about the world and one way to increase interest in and participation in civic affairs. However, if there are people and institutions in society interested in finding what are the best ways to engage youth in civic participation, then the youth should play a major and active role in that process.

Importance of Research

The existing literature (such as Stebbins and Graham, 2004) has shows that many recommendations and interests of previous research tend to focus on the reasons for volunteering, its importance, why should people volunteer (civic engagement) and how they benefit, what it means for individuals and society and also in encouraging the next generation (youth) to volunteer. There is a lack of interest in studying why people are not volunteering, whether or not they chose to. In the literature, volunteering is often linked

to civic participation and is identified also by some of the participants in this study as being participation in society.

The research is important because it seeks to be inclusive of young people’s voices in research on civic participation. It will also help to make the issues that youth identify as significant concerning civic participation visible in the academic literature and possibly within non-academic arenas, such as community organizations that are interested and involved in placing civic participation on their agendas.

Locating myself in the research

I am interested in this topic not only because of my personal experiences with this population, but also my interest in youth¹ as a group. In my volunteer and work experiences, I have come across youth who showed great interest in participating in different community activities. For example, youth who had many excellent ideas as to how to combat and fight racism within their communities. Many were excited about being able to contribute to developing a youth-led anti-racism network. Most did not know there were opportunities, like the anti-racism network, through which their ideas could be explored and implemented. Their excitement about the prospect of such an activity and eagerness to get started, speaks volume about the need to reach out to youth and engage them in civic affairs.

As a young woman, I felt little anxious about doing research with participants² who may be close to my age. However, I wondered about how my similarity in age (not

¹ Youth is used interchangeably with young people throughout the discussion

² I use participants and respondents to include the youth who were interviewed for this research project.

too old) would affect the relationship between the participants and myself. I felt satisfied that I am one of ‘them’ both in age and possibly race. I knew that I would be interviewing youth from different racial backgrounds. Therefore, I identify myself as a youth, not only in age, but also in culture. By this I mean that even though I am outside of the defining age range identified by this research³, I also feel young. I am energetic and do not see myself as an aged person, opposite of youth. I would even describe myself as a young adult. Therefore, in participating in this research, I found that my self-identified youth drew me closer to the participants and helped to form a bond with them. This helped in creating and setting a comfortable and open stage for the interviews. They also saw me as being able to understand them more, based on some comments made in the interviews. This was possibly because I might have had shared experiences with some of the participants.

Should I feel privileged to be in this position? Williams (2001) would describe this as the insider/outsider role. As an insider, I identify as a youth. I am also an outsider as the person doing the research. Williams (2001, p.238) asserts, “In all research situations, the fact that one group of people is able to conduct research and another group is the subject of research is itself an indication of power differences. She further suggests that this would give me intellectual power and control over the participants. This would then place me in a compromising position, as I know that I do not claim to have this intellectual control over others, but that my presence would determine that. I did not find this to be the reality of my experience.

³ Youth in this research is identified as being 15-24 years old.

Throughout the discussion, I have found it necessary to refer myself in the report by using ‘I’, and ‘Me’. I recognize the importance of this research project as being an academic paper. However, it becomes necessary to acknowledge my subjectivity in the research process. I feel strongly that I was a very important part of that relationship, however, brief.

Finally, the discussion centers on how youth are engaged in civic participation and what are some of the barriers to effective youth participation? I explore these questions and more through an analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 8 young people living in and around the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). I conclude this paper with a brief exploration of how some of these patterns might inform social workers and those involved in working with youth to effectively engage them in civic participation.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a review of the literature on the topic of civic participation. It summarizes the information available on this topic. It begins by presenting the three major concepts to be used throughout the discussion. After this presentation of concepts, some of the varying forms of civic participation is discussed using the literature available. The chapter ends by examining some possible solutions to engaging youth as found in the literature on youth participation and engagement.

There is a lot of research on youth, civic participation, and social work engaging youth particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The effort can be seen in the literature, government studies, and other forms of research on including youth. The literature defines civic participation in confining terms. Consequently, I found that each author would confine his or her research to a specific form of civic participation, while introducing the discussion as being about civic participation. Civic participation is used to mean individual conceptions of political participation, volunteerism, citizenship, community involvement, and social recreation. Various authors, from community or academia, have studied all these forms of civic participation. Political participation appears to be a more widely accepted form of civic participation. Society appears to be more responsive to this form of participation.

Some authors and researchers have attempted to engage youth to assess their civic participation in various ways. However, it is rarely seen where youth voices have been

actively engaged in the process. The methodology most used by some researchers has been questionnaires and focus groups. These are efficient ways of gathering information, but not necessarily effective in gaining in-depth knowledge and comprehension of their participation.

Defining Major Concepts

In this section, I am going to identify some key concepts that relate to civic participation and engaging youth. According to Gilgun (2001), this does not restrict or confine the discussion. However, they are identified not to confine or restrict our understanding of these issues but to help better shape the focus of the exploration. “The use of analytical induction and sensitizing concepts permits the development of conceptual frameworks prior to entering the field” (Gilgun, 2001, p.359). Definitions of major concepts can confine the scope of a research. The main concepts within this research are youth, engaging youth, and civic participation.

Youth

The definition of youth in the literature varies widely with different researchers and organizations. For the purposes of this research, youth is defined as being in the age range of 15 to 24. I believe this age group will provide insight into experiences of different social, institutional, and developmental contexts. (Youth Service Canada, 2005 and United Nations General Assembly, 2005). The United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development (2000) makes this clarification “within the category of ‘youth’, it is also important to distinguish between teenagers (13-19) and young adults (20-24), since the sociological, psychological, and health problems they face may differ.” It must

be noted that within the literature, terms such as young adults, adolescents, and teenagers are attributed and used interchangeably for youth within the identified age group.

Engaging Youth

As a starting point for this research, engaging youth can be defined as a process of meaningful, voluntary participation of young people ages 15-24 (Laidlaw Foundation, 2003 and Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). Engaging youth is taken to mean a process and not necessarily an outcome. Thus, in the process of engaging, any reaction would be welcomed and appreciated. For example, it may mean garnering interest in something. According to the literature on engaging youth, some key indicators of successful youth engagement in local government are inclusion, experiential learning, localization, adult-youth partnerships, institutionalization, and capacity-building (World Urban Forum, 2005).

Civic Participation

The literature uses several definitions of civic participation. I view civic participation as encompassing of rights and responsibilities to and within society that is played out in various ways. Civic participation refers to individuals' active engagement with and involvement in their communities (Longford, 2005). However, the academic literature and other sources of information available on the issue of youth civic participation focus on only some forms of participation, which are explored further in the literature review. Political participation, social participation, community participation are some of the ways of participating. Using the questions as a guide for interviewing youth, it is hoped that participants within this research will voice the meanings they attribute to

civic participation. This is consistent with using participants’ data to inform the study. Because the concept of civic participation appears to have been limited, we often make assumptions that youth either do not participate or do not participate enough.

Longford (2005) defines civic participation as individuals’ active engagement with and involvement in their communities. This definition should be extended to include individuals’ passive engagement and participation, as this definition is confining. He also found that civic participation is “a key determinant and indicator of both individual and community development and well-being” (p.6). The author qualifies this statement by connecting civic participation to social capital and showing how both are mutually reinforcing.

Existing Debate and Suggestions

After defining the major concepts, the following sections will present the existing literature on the topic. In addressing the issue of how to engage youth in civic participation, the information can be found in the literature dealing with citizenship, civic participation, and youth participation. In reading the academic literature, reports from community organization, groups, and government departments, there appears to be a discrepancy in the definitions/explanations on the subject of civic participation (Frideres, 1997; Arai, 2004; Bell, 2005).

Civic Participation as Political Participation

Some sources assume that the readers know what the concept of civic participation is and thus, neglect to make their definitions clear in their methodology

(Gauthier, 2006). With this assumption in mind, they go further to discuss political participation and then make the connection that civic is political. Political participation is only a small part of civic participation (Schugurensky, 2003). Participation in this case refers to participation in politics (voting).

In terms of political participation, it appears that young people are less informed about civic society and this in turn affects their political participation. Furthermore, it is apparent in examining political participation in the United States that the country's efforts to engage youth have shown limited success in the past. Fletcher (2004) found that young people were discarded when they were no longer needed. He noted that politics and politicians can 'destroy as well as build' and that they tend to destroy youth in the process. Most young people feel that politics do not make a difference. They tend to prefer community service because they can see immediate and tangible results from activities such as serving soup or tutoring a child. This explains their lack of engagement in politics.

Voting for young people is not sacramental. According to Adler and Goggin (2005), voting has been falling for young people. The evident decline in voter turnout has been explained by focusing on young people. Civic participation as work done publicly to benefit the public may then become a form of rediscovering politics (Adler and Goggin, 2005).

Citizenship as Civic Participation

Other writers make the connection between civic participation and citizenship (Schugurensky, 2003 and Ibrahim, 2005). Citizenship is a contested term. It is complex

and has many dimensions, depending on who is defining it (Heisler, 2005). Citizenship often implies a ‘legal status’, which refers to political rights and also by one’s active participation within a community. Schugurensky (2003) notes that civic participation is not a term limited to individual conceptions of political participation, volunteerism, social recreation and community participation as is shown in the academic and field practice literature. Ibrahim (2005) states that civic engagement emanates from the idea that citizens have rights to social participation and obligations to contribute to problem-solving in their communities.

Volunteering and Civic Participation

Volunteering is seen as another form of civic participation. Stebbins and Graham (2004) write that there is the need for future research into volunteering as leisure. Between 1997 and 2000, there has been a slight decrease in volunteer participation by youth ages 15-24. Generally, the number of people who volunteer in Canada has dropped by 4% (Arai, 2004). Volunteering as leisure can be said to be that which “takes place during leisure time and enables people to find personal meaning and identity and to express through action their needs, interests, and social and political values” (Arai, 2004, p.151). Reed and Selbee (2001) created a list of various forms of civic engagement, and they found that volunteering is the least common form of civic engagement in Canada. They also show the interrelatedness of civic participation and volunteering. The authors found that civic participation stands out as a prevalent and distinguishing characteristic of volunteers. Civic participation is omnipresent when a wide range of factors is controlled for—geographic, social and demographic. However, it must be noted that only active

volunteers were identified and examined in their study. Therefore, it says little about inactive and passive volunteers who may indeed be volunteering but not seen as active.

Civic service is one form of volunteering that is related to civic participation. Civic service is shaped by the history, culture and political context, as well as the traditions of service in a community (Stroud, 2005). The GSI (Global Service Institute, 2003) takes the stance that civic service is a form of long-term, intensive volunteering. Another author, Hodgkinson (2004) wrote that a clear set of definitions needed especially in differentiating between volunteering and civic service.

It becomes necessary to identify those who participate in civic society. Selbee and Reed (2001) examined the consequences of a civic core for the voluntary sector and society. A civic core is defined as “those who are responsible for two-thirds of all efforts in a particular sphere of activity” (p.763). Within this civic core, participation is defined as volunteering one’s time, giving to charities, and actively participating in community organizations. The authors conclude that there is a common profile of people in the civic core. Some of these characteristics are elitist: elevated levels of education and income; strong religious orientation; support for a common good; and explicit commitment to the community. The authors did not make clear the breakdown of the core by age and population. There appears to be many assumptions made about why youth are not participating in civic society. What are the areas that they are participating in that could be considered civic? Do the youth see their non-participation as participation?

Gender

In analyzing the possible effect gender may have on youth participation, research shows that both young women and men respond in the same way to the increased attention being paid to them and their role in the political process. This is by tuning out and doing little (Jenkins, 2005). The ratio of young women to men in the selection of participants was significant. Research shows that ‘young women are more likely to believe in the importance of individual efforts to improve society (Jenkins, 2005).

Furthermore, young women have been surpassing young men in education. The author (Jenkins, 2005) argues that low levels of civic literacy in education have impacted on young people’s participation. Young women are more engaged than men. Girls have been found to prefer a wider assortment of involvement whereas boys are more likely to report participation in sports (Borden et.al., 2006). There is also a tendency for some groups/populations (women and Blacks) to mention both altruistic and non-altruistic reasons for volunteering (Hwang, Grabb, and Curtis, 2005). These groups are more likely to ‘give back to the community’.

Engaging Youth

Bell (2005) noted that there was a hiatus in the literature on civic participation and civic engagement of youth for a length of time. However, apart from the renewed interest in youth’s political participation in voting (Youth Service Canada, 2005 and the Toronto Star, May 2004), researchers have been increasingly interested in finding the reasons why youth are not engaged in civic participation and more importantly, what can be done to change this particular phenomena. What do the youth have to say about their

participation or non-participation? Does this supposedly lack of participation mean that youth will not participate fully when they get older? Is there a connection? Some young people do not participate in their community because they are not willing to take chances that may be risky due to the unknown, and also because of a ‘lack of confidence’ in self that would help them to step outside their comfort zone (Jones, 1980). As young people grow older and move through adolescence, they develop the ability to make their own decisions and be open and questioning and aware of the community and society by which they are surrounded. It is the norm that they become more skilled at navigating through this system. As exception to all norms, there may be some who do not follow this path (Jones and Dunham, 1980).

Health Canada (2000) has conducted a study to identify youth participation in Canadian communities. It was found that youth voices are not heard in many communities. It was also found that participation and involvement mean different things to different young people and that communities have difficulty in involving marginal youth and youth from various ethnic and cultural groups. The report shows that youth felt that the political level was seen as crucial for legitimizing youth participation. I found that even within this study the knowledge of adult officials and service providers were sought before that of youth themselves. As part of the methodology, a total of 52 interviews were completed with municipal officials, representatives of youth serving agencies and police officers familiar with police-based youth initiatives. This was ironic given that youth participation was in itself an objective of the research.

It is apparent that youth are not being actively engaged in the assessment of civic participation. Active engagement would allow for their voices to be heard. Youth experiences of marginalization have often placed them at the outside of society wherein they are sometimes not included in civil discussions. To have their voices heard is a legitimizing and emancipatory part of their marginalized experiences.

In an editorial in the Toronto Star (May 2004), it was noted that voting trends of Canadian young people has decreased. The editor suggested that youth are under-engaged and that is possibly one of the reasons for the low turnout. There appears to be a lot of assumptions made about the reasons why youth are not participating in politics or society in general. However, there has been some effort made to engage youth. For example, the federal and provincial political parties have sanctioned a campaign entitled *Youth Vote*, which are youth-based policies to encourage youth to vote. Some are interested in re-engaging youth. But I question whether or not youth have always been engaged? And what forms this engagement took?

Possible solutions for effective youth participation

In terms of alternative solutions, some community organizations, such as the suggest that a solution is to have more government resources put towards encouraging youth to participate in civic life and society. However, I ask, where are these resources being placed? Who are benefiting and/or being engaged by these resources? Some of the solutions and recommendations on engaging youth in civic participation have been dealt with by community organizations such as the Laidlaw Foundation. However, some of them appear not to be adequate as there is still an increasing need to engage youth in

society. For example in voting patterns, youth participation has been declining (Kohler and Campbell, 2006). Also, some of these recommendations and/or solutions may not be well received by the youth population. This could be because youth was not actively involved in the process of reaching solutions that would impact them.

Some studies suggest that young people in our society can be very effective change agents if given the right opportunity. For example, the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) in Mississippi played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. Mississippi's peripheral status in the development of the civil rights movement changed when the SNCC began developing projects in 1961 (Andrews, 1997). In a study of the potential of youth participation in urban planning, the author paid more attention to creating opportunities for youth participation than to removing barriers faced by established initiatives (Frank, 2006). The problem with not looking at barriers is that it leads to a 'band-aid' approach wherein the real issues are overlooked and the visible results are patched with what can only be temporary solutions.

As noted before, the literature also shows some effort been made to engage youth. For example, the political parties have sanctioned a campaign entitled *Youth Vote*, which are youth-based policies to encourage youth to vote. In engaging youth, who are the youth targeted? In terms of diversity in race, class, and gender, some writers have touched on class within their research. According to Bacon (October 2005), since civic engagement is important to society, it needs to be encouraged and nurtured. A university as a place of higher education has this responsibility for youth. However, the article points only to young people who will have access to universities. They will be the ones

nurtured on the journey to civic engagement. What about the others who are out of school or not in institutions of higher learning? So in other words, issues of class have not been addressed in the literature. Are we further marginalizing a population of youth already marginalized by the very nature of their ‘youth’?

Charles (2005) researched African American youth in an effort to better understand and explore the trends of civic engagement trends. She found instead that this population’s conception of civic engagement is separate from mainstream civic institutions and civic life. This community and youth population placed emphasis on ‘giving back to the community’. Giving back to the community is “a description of actions that have already been taken (largely) by an individual to positively impact others in the community in which they live or lived at one time in the past” (p.4). Charles recommends that it is imperative to the discussion on civic participation and engagement that ‘giving back to the community’ must be added to the common forms of civic participation. However, Diller (as cited in Adler and Goggin, 2005) has a more expansive definition. “We define civic engagement as all activity related to personal and societal enhancement, which results in improved human connection and human condition” (p.240).

Thus, civic participation should be all encompassing of service to and within the wider community and society. This should include the varying forms of service such as political participation, volunteerism, social recreation, giving to charities, and community participation. However, as Schugurensky (2003) notes, this should not limit the use and understanding of civic participation to youth.

What is missing?

After reviewing the existing literature, I strongly believe that there is a gap that needs to be filled. First of all, there are wide ranges of definitions of civic participation. To effectively address such an important issue, a single, widely agreed upon working definition of youth participation is urgently needed. Otherwise, the way we define civic participation might be a major barrier itself. If youth participation falls outside of the prescribed definition of civic participation, then their participation may not be accepted. Therefore, in evaluating participation, youth's participation may be further marginalized because it would not be included. The regained interest in civic participation and hence, increased youth participation in civic society will then be affected. If we are to study youth civic participation, then we must engage their full and active participation. This is not apparent in the literature and in other research undertaken.

For this reason, this research is to directly involve the youth and give space for them to explore and express their own definitions and conception of civic participation, as well as major obstacles preventing them from participating.

How this research will address gap and points of departure

This research attempts to address the issue of the use of civic participation in wide and varying ways that may be limiting to the engagement of youth. Therefore, how do we define and conceptualize civic participation in such a way that the youth comprehend it and it becomes useful in determining their participation. This will be done by getting their thoughtful input into the process of defining civic participation. The discussion

presented below in the research methodology suggests an analysis that seeks to answer several questions concerned with engaging youth in civic participation.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

The basis of this research is to explore the issue of engaging youth in civic participation. This chapter offers a comprehensive look at how the researcher performed this task. A qualitative approach was used in accomplishing this task as it allows the researcher to examine the multiplicity of youths’ experiences in their everyday lives as it concerns civic participation. First, the relevance of using a qualitative methodology is briefly discussed. Second, I examined how participants were recruited and selected for this research. It gives the criteria used in this selection and explains why these criteria were used. Third, the section on research design discusses the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Fourth, the interview guide is briefly discussed and talks about the challenges that I found with using this guide. Finally, the chapter tells how the data was collected, managed and analyzed.

I will approach this research using qualitative methodology. This methodology will provide me an opportunity to examine the substantive experiences of the youth and the complexity of the issue. Moreover, a critical approach to research knowledge was used. According to Neuman (1997) is the approach to research that ‘critiques and transforms social relations’ and seeks to empower those that are powerless, will be used. This is important because it deals with an issue of oppression and marginalization that is perpetuated by the systems, institutions and structures that exist in society today. It can be reasoned that when a researcher undertakes research on populations that are

marginalized using a critical approach, then the aim is to change and challenge the structures that exist and persist in maintaining marginalization. It is the objective of this to identify implications for related policy debates that will see youth being active in civil life.

The proposed research uses Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory design to explain how youth engage in civic participation. This theory is suited for this research because it uses an inductive approach to inform the development of theory (Ezzy, 2002 and Strauss and Corbin, 1990). I believe that grounded theory is also a good fit with social work research. In social work, practioners usually start where the clients are, which is similar to the grounded theory approach (Gilgun, 2001). Furthermore, this approach to research is good at giving voice to the voiceless. This is dependent on the presentation of findings in such a way that it holds the reader in the position of being a part of the process. Gilgun (2001) states, “inviting the reader into the vicarious experiences of informants is a vehicle for giving voices to the voiceless” (p.355).

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Youth was selected for the research interviews based the following criteria:

- Age: 15 – 24 years
- Gender: male and female
- Prior/current participation:
 - youth who are already involved in civic participation
 - youth who are not involved
 - youth who want to get involved but are not because of hindrances/barriers
 - youth who want to get involved but do not know how.

I believe this age group will provide insight into experiences of different social, institutional, and developmental contexts. It is apparent in the research that issues of

gender, class, and particularly race are not often explored as a factor in youth participation. I was also interested in finding out if civic participation would be different if youth from different backgrounds were participating. Would the responses to civic participation be different if the participant is male or female? Would the presence of race be a factor in youth's participation? I will try to balance the representation of youth in terms of gender and race. Age was the only exclusionary criteria. In terms of gender, and participation, inclusivity in the form of the presence of at least one participant in each category was important to the selection. I intended to explore how the issue of race was taken up in the discourse by the participants. But in the actual interviews this issue did not really come out as a particular concern. This is why in the discussion I will not focus on race as I had originally planned.

Originally I conducted two pilot interviews with persons who identified as youth, but did not fall in the age range. These two interviews were not used in the analysis of the research topic. I then went on to interview eight young people who were all used in the study. They all ranged in ages from 16 to 24 years old. Respondents were either youth of colour or White. There were six females and two males within the group.

The aim was to interview between 10 and 12 participants, of which I ended up interviewing eight youth. It was difficult to recruit more youth for a variety of reasons. One of which was that by the time I started to focus on the data collection stage, schools were out and youth were off to summer camps and some at work.

My respondents were all living either in the GTA or in smaller surrounding cities, such as Hamilton. They were reached out to by using a variety of strategies. Personal

contacts and word of mouth were used to recruit potential participants. Some flyers were distributed in varying places, such as schools and public libraries. Participants had the option of contacting me by phone or email to express their interest in participating. This method of recruitment did not prove as fruitful as I would have liked. This was due mostly to the limited time available. I also approached several youth that I had worked with before on community projects. They helped to recruit others for the research. The remainder of the participants were youth with whom I spoke and who showed an interest in being a part of the interviews.

Research Design

In-depth interviews were used as the method of data collection. An in-depth interview as a qualitative approach to this topic will contribute substantial information (data) from youth as participants for the research. In order to examine and explore the issue, several semi-structured questions were asked (Appendix A). Semi-structured interview questions allow for a focused interview guide, but also ‘a degree of continuity across a set of related interviews’. Youth were interviewed for the substance and content of their experiences and thoughts. Within these in-depth interviews, I asked a range of questions on the youths’ understanding of civic participation, knowledge about navigating through resources available for participation, and reasons why they may or may not be involved.

During the proposal stage of this research, I struggled in the decision to use in-depth semi-structured interviews and group interviews. My experience in Hamilton makes me aware of the use of focus groups to gain information from youth. Often, there

were a series of focus groups taking place with youth one after the other in a short period of time. Some of the young people I spoke with in my experience as a project coordinator felt that they were being over-studied and over-researched. Youth are increasingly being called upon to participate in service and program activities in order to encourage youth civic participation and attachment to their community (Fogel, 2004).

Furthermore, the complexity of youth's concerns may not have been adequately addressed as shown by the methods adopted by these studies. They were not effectively engaged because it can be reasoned that methods such as focus groups are a channel for youth to voice their concerns, however, there is a lack of depth in these method. Because of the number of participants within the focus group, often five to twelve, there is limited opportunity for each participant to adequately voice his or her thoughts and ideas (Robertson and Dearling, 2004). To address this methodological concern, in-depth interviews will be used as the data collection method in this study. The in-depth interview is defined as a semi-structured interview, which gives voice to the life experiences of participants in detail and thoroughly (Goodman, 2001). Thus, the method of in-depth interview would give more space for the youth to express themselves and allow the interviewer to delve into the difficulties of youth's experiences in engaging in civic participation. It is particularly useful for us to look at the complexity of their experience and opinion on civic participation and questions like: what really makes the youth interested? What really prevents them from participating? What are their concerns? What would make them more effective? This information is situated in participants' everyday lives and cannot be adequately tapped on with the focus group

approach. Focus groups tend to elicit ‘specific questions about an issue/topic after considerable research has already been completed and further restricts participants’ individual expressions (Fontana and Frey, 1994).

Interview Guide and Challenges

The four questions listed noted above in the introduction were explored using an interview guide (Appendix A). In keeping with Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory design, the interview guide served as a guide that provided me with the scope and framework to engage in the dialogue with the participants during the semi-structured interviews. The order and emphasis was contingent upon the flow of the conversation and the interests of the participants.

Williams, Tutty, and Grinnell (1995) made a statement about the research interview that might sound selfish and hardhearted. They said, “the purpose of the research interview is to gather the data needed to answer the research question—a research interview is for the researcher” (p.255). However, it is true of any research interview. In reaching this end, it becomes critical that respondents have a sound understanding of the purpose of the interview and the subsequent questions. I found it difficult to reach this end—gathering substantive information for the research project. As a novice interviewer, I approached the interview with an open mind and slate. I knew that I was not in the position of researcher to influence and/or bias the respondents’ comments. Even though theoretically, I was in a position of some power simply by being the researcher (Williams, 2001). As a social worker, I knew this to be wrong and unfair

to my participants. However, after a few interviews, I realized that youth were not ready to answer the questions as they were.

The questions were very simple as written, but I went further to provide subsequent and lengthy explanations and clarifications to the participants. Bailey (1987) notes that probes are usually general and neutral. The major function of a probe is to provide a minimally acceptable answer or to allow the respondent to answer more fully and accurately. Even with probes, I found the youth to be very limited in their understanding of some of the questions. I was worried throughout most of the interviews, about probing too much or too little. I overcame this by allowing youth to respond to the questions and probes in whichever way they would like. In some cases, the lack of information or knowledge about topics such as civic participation and barriers to youth participation led me to the partial conclusion that the absence is in itself an issue to be analyzed in the research. Therefore, I had to ask myself and the research, what was this absence of knowledge telling me? This topic is delineated in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, I recognized that I was struggling with the participants' limited understanding of the topics and questions possibly because I expected that youth would understand more about the topic. I also expected youth between the ages of 16-24 years old to be more aware of their society and thus, be in an intellectual position where there would be little trouble with answering the questions as asked. This is because in this age group, I think that it is a societal expectation that youth are either in high school, university/college, and/or employment. I did not make space for the exceptions to this

presumed expectation. Therefore, I dealt with this by spending more time in explaining and simplifying the questions.

Data Collection

Interviews took approximately one hour each and were conducted either in my home, in a coffee shop, in the participant’s home, or in the local community centre. All interviews but one were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. In a few of these interviews, there was not much said on the topic of youth participation. In others youth were excited to talk about their participation and lack of participation.

At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the research was explained to participants by the investigator. This helped to ensure that their understanding of the research is similar to that of the investigator. The participants were then provided the opportunity to clarify any concerns they may have. The informed consent forms were handed out, signed, and collected before the interview began.

Participants were not forced to participate in the research. The right to withdraw was included in the consent form. This right was also explained to participants at the beginning of the interview. No identifying information was included in the notes and written reports (including transcripts of the interviews). An identity code was used to identify participants throughout the data analysis process.

Data Management

I was the interviewer for the research project. I was also responsible for transcribing the data received on tapes. The participants all gave permission to tape the

interview conversations. After each interview, the tape was placed in a safe place at my home. The tape was then be transcribed after each interview. Upon completion of the research, the tape and all transcription notes will be kept for 5 years, in a locked cabinet that only myself would have access, after which they will be destroyed. Participants were informed that the tapes would be kept for this length of time. This will allow me to possibly do more work on the project or publish from findings.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using content analysis. The systematic and structured aspects of content analysis will be used. Content analysis is a type of data coding structure. It is an objective analysis of written communication (Berg, 1989). For this research, it will be necessary to examine and analyze the underlined meaning, that is meaning implied, that was conveyed within the communication.

The data was continually analyzed after each interview was conducted. Codes were constructed as common themes emerged during the analysis. Throughout the data collection, the research interview guide was re-assessed and reformulated so as to examine major, emerging themes in greater details to provide further direction to the research (Bogden and Biklen, 1982). This approach to the research and its data analysis is consistent with using grounded theory as the theoretical foundation of this research.

The letter ‘R’ was used to represent respondents and single letter acronyms used to identify each respondent being quoted. Throughout this analysis, the method of open-coding (Berg, 1989) was used. This method includes four steps:

1. Ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions

2. Analyze the data minutely. This was done by reading the transcripts line by line.
3. Frequently interrupt the coding to write a theoretical note. I reflected back to the literature review.
4. Never assume the analytical relevance of any traditional variable such as age, class, etc. until the data shows it to be relevant.

The analysis of this research project was a reflective process. It is essential that one is reflective in the research process, as to be aware of the influence on the research and the possible distortions or biases that may arise because of this reflective approach (Whitmore, 2001). Hunter (2004) argues that reflexivity is imperative in the research process in order to help make visible that which is invisible in one's own epistemology. This awareness became clear and real to me while I was engaged in the interviews with participants. As a novice researcher, I realized how easy it was to allow one's biases to trickle over into the asking of questions. Biases may be present in the way a question is asked and probed into. Probing is indeed a skill that social workers need to be good at doing whether they are engaged in practice or policy work. However, it was too easy to prompt and provide helpful hints to respondents that could inevitably bias the research. As a novice researcher and with little experience in doing one-on-one interviews, this affected this process also. I had to be very careful to refrain from this temptation. This was also difficult because the youth found it hard to understand the questions. This was in light of the fact that the questions were simple and I had to explain them in varying ways.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In these interviews, comments followed several patterns: the attachment of negative connotations to the term ‘youth’; a limited or lack of understanding and knowledge about civic participation; clear expectations of how they would like to learn about civic participation—be engaged; and the connection of personal attributes as barriers to participation. These patterns suggest that young people’s understanding of their participation is far deeper than those involved in academic and field research on youth participation. After reviewing all the data, I found two major themes. First, this section explores the discourse on youth civic participation. The second section examines the discrepancies that were found with social work’s understanding of the barriers to youth civic participation.

1. Discourse on Youth Civic Participation

Youth were interviewed on the topic of civic participation and what they understand by the term. The respondents mostly asked to have the term explained to them before they could begin to acknowledge their understanding of civic participation. They appeared to have varying reactions to the discussion on civic participation at the beginning of the interviews. By the end of the interviews, they seemed to talk more freely of their participation and whether or not they saw their participation as being civic participation. This chapter will discuss youth’s definition of civic participation. It will

then examine the ways in which youth participate in their communities. Participants were asked about their views of society’s perception of ‘youth’ and how this may or may not affect their participation. They attached several meanings to the term youth and concentrated mostly on the negative connotations they hear attached to youth. The chapter will conclude with a discussion on engaging youth and what that looks like.

i. Definition of youth civic participation

Examining civic engagement and participation as a single entity is a field that is relatively undiscovered in the literature. As stated in the literature review, some of the limiting definitions attached to civic engagement are civic engagement as community service; as political involvement; as volunteering; and as citizenship. For the purposes of this discussion, a simple definition was used that describes how an active citizen⁴ participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future. This conception is similar to Charles’s (2005) analysis of youth giving back to the community. Thus, civic participation would exist if you were acting in a way that benefits your community.

Even with this logical and simple definition, more than half of all respondents did not know what civic participation meant. A young woman stated, “Never heard the words before. Participation means being involved...being a part of”. (R4). Another respondent said, “I don’t understand. I don’t know. I’ve never heard of civic participation. I’ve heard of civic holiday.” (R2). The two respondents had some idea of civic participation. Respondent (R3) summarized it in the following statement,

⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, citizen is used to mean anyone who resides in a place or country.

Participating in your community. Doing things that benefits the entire community. What it means to me, doing something that will sustain the development of my community and sustain the development of mankind on a whole. (R3).

This lack of and limited knowledge of civic participation is in itself a finding. Society⁵ appears to have a renewed interest in youth participation. For example, in the specific case of political participation, politicians are constantly on the prowl about the decrease in voting among the present generation of youth. Civic participation is the term used to describe this participation and others, with the expectation that youth understand what it is. This research found that youth do not know what ‘civic participation’ is.

Clearly this research showed that the issue is not why youth are not engaged in civic participation. More importantly, we should look at the discrepancy between how youth themselves define civic participation and the activity and understanding that mainstream academic and social elite has suggested.

ii. How do youth participate?

If we were to be consistent with the literature’s discourse on civic participation, then we could safely say that civic participation is a desirable activity. This desirability is measured by the extent and quality of one’s participation in that community (Schugurensky, 2003). Young people’s lack of participation as shown in the literature and in society’s cry for increased participation is reflected by the response of respondent:

⁵ Society is a word used in general terms. It represents those individuals, organizations, politicians, government officials, and others who have an interest in understanding and increasing youth civic participation.

Young people are involved in society. Being involved in an organized, structured way, I don't know. But they are other avenues that young people participate...through sports. Through organized institutions like church, junior achievement that kind of stuff. Yes we organized and we are participating (R3).

The above statement points to a renewed look at how youth are participating in society and most importantly, in non-traditional areas. The lesson to learn from this is that youth participation needs to be understood in terms of the areas that youth are actually participating in and not only what is desirable or expected of them. I believe that if this is not done, then there will continually be concerns over youth's declining participation, as the results will be skewed.

Areas of youth's participation

When the participants were asked what kinds of activities they are involved in, it was clear that today's generation of young people is clearly engaged in helping to solve society's problems through volunteering with a variety of organizations. Almost a half of the respondents between the ages of 16-24 years old reported volunteering for at least one organization. Some of the organizations mentioned by participants were the Arthritis Society, MS Society, YWCA, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, World Vision, and the Youth Anti-Racism Network (YARN).

Based on the views of the respondents, youth were generally interested in participating in society by whatever means they identified. Young people are more active in community service. Some were not participating at present, but still expressed interest in doing so at some time in the future.

I guess I would like to work with kids. Or like social work stuff. I am really interested. I don't know if I would want to volunteer for that. I would like to volunteer with seniors and oh...with animals too. (R2).

Based on the literature and information in the field, is this civic participation? The general consensus is that civic participation would be if one acts in a way that benefits one's community. Respondent (R5) clearly states, “yes, I see these activities as being part of civic participation because you are helping people in your community.” Another respondent similarly states, “participating in your community, doing things that benefits the entire community. What it means to me, doing something that will sustain the development of my community and sustain the development of mankind on a whole.” (R3).

The description of the plight of young people in the world today can be applied to that of Pakistan youth and North American youth (Pakistan National Youth Service, 2006). Some young people experience isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness, idleness (due to lack of time for activities). Some of the barriers they face are lack of access both economically and socially. There is also a lack of participation in decision-making.

iii. Meaning attached to youth: Negative perceptions far outweighed the positives

In my opinion, it can be said that society views young people as loafers. It is often a mixture of finding young people to be irrelevant and then on top of that, they are something to be feared. The respondents reported hearing mostly negative perceptions of youth. Some of these negative attachments to the term ‘youth’ are often implied within the respondents’ comments. For example, youth reported that because they are seen to be irresponsible, still ‘young in development’ they might be seen as in need of protection. Respondent (R3) said, “someone who is just entering adulthood. Someone who is

developing responsibilities. Like learning the values of what adults would later on do.

Like everything related to growing up like how you would do without your parents.”

These negative connotations would lead society to view youth as a ‘vulnerable’ group to be protected.

By viewing youth as a group to be protected from themselves, we lose sight of the importance of working with youth to identify positive solutions and build strong communities. Furthermore, we need to recognize that “young people who are involved in positive activities such as community service and participation in civic affairs are less likely to pursue risky behaviours or get in trouble” (National League of Cities, 2000). Respondent (R1) comments on the negative views that society holds of youth showed that this may prevent us from finding solutions to problems.

I am hearing just negative information about youth. Specially focusing on Black youth with the gun and the violence. They just portray a negative image on the Black youth. I think they focus more on the negative sides of youth rather than finding solutions to what the real problem is. (R4).

It is interesting to find that on one hand, youth reported hearing negative connotations from and within society. On the other hand, youth themselves offered descriptions of their definitions of youth that were also negative. Was this a reflection of society’s views that youth have internalized, because they appear to hear it quite often? Here is what respondent (R4) had to say,

Uneducated, maybe ignorance to a lot that goes on in our world. Because youth may choose not to understand or gain knowledge about it. It’s not positive things that are coming out. It’s more negative connotation to what a youth are involved in society...like driving a car through a high school, like in Burlington a few months ago or bush parties every Friday night. (R4).

According to Allahar and Côté (1998), young people’s status in society has been diminished. They are seen more as liabilities than assets. The authors trace this status to

negative stereotypes. The ideology of youth has evolved over many centuries. Young people’s marginalized status in society is somehow different from other marginalized groups. For example, some in society still consider it “legitimate to speak of the young adult as somehow biologically unsuitable for full participation in society” (Allahar and Côté, 1998, p.140). Youth must be extended the same duties of all citizens which include civic engagement, including paying taxes, volunteering in one’s community and fulfilling other social duties.

Along with the perception of negative meaning attached to youth, the respondents also defined themselves in other ways. Some respondents described youth as being energetic, having lots of potential, and a phase of development, path to independence, chronological age, and culture—a feeling. This following paragraphs will examine two of the above descriptions, energy and having lots of potential.

Energetic and lots to offer—lots of potential

Several respondents described themselves as a young person in terms of their energy level. They described a young person as someone who is energetic and ‘pretty young’. This energy represents life. When asked to describe herself as a youth, respondent (R4) stated, “someone who is energetic”. Young people have always been associated with having too much energy and time to waste. This could be a positive trait that should be used to the benefit of society. This energy can be translated into effective and meaningful participation. Young people can be seen as a reservoir of potential that is waiting to be tapped into. Another respondent had this to say, “I see myself as someone with a future ahead and a lot of potential. Someone who is just ready for

challenges that life have to offer.” (R3). This may be the thought of one young person, but how many more do we not know about? Society should not allow even one young person’s potential to be wasted.

The effect of the conception of youth on youth participation

In the interviews, youth were asked if their view of themselves as a youth would affect their participation. Of the eight respondents, seven answered no to this question. This is in keeping with all the negative information and connotations they hear attached to the term youth. This is not negating the fact that respondents state that sometimes it does affect the way youth participate. One particular respondent said that her view of herself might affect her participation and involvement. Here is what youth have to say,

I guess it would. Because sometimes I guess you lack time. When you are younger you have more time to do things because you don’t have the responsibilities, the bills...whatever. When you are older I guess you understand more about giving back and what benefits that have to giving back. We don’t realize it till later...like I should have done this when I was in high school. (R2).

Self-fulfilling prophecy

There was a general consensus among youth interviewed that dwelled on the self-fulfilling prophecy of life. The self-fulfilling prophecy means that if something is said to happen, then it might as well happen because that is what is believed will happen. Respondents (R6) and (R7) mentioned that the perception of negative associations attached to youth produces two kinds of people. They both agreed that,

When you hear the negative things, there is like, two kinds of people. That people that would wanna prove them wrong, then you have people that would prove them right. Afterwards they would go out and actually do something. Then you have the ones who saying to the world this is what you think about me, then I’ll go do it. (R7 and R6).

Another respondent (R3) also stated,

There is a self-fulfilling prophecy, if they are told you are going to be bad...everyday that's what they are being told, they might just be bad. Might just leap towards that perceived expectation. And I think one, a lot of youths now are not encouraged. We are being labeled as renegades, so might as well we be renegades. But there is a set that choose to be different. (R3).

Therefore, according to what respondents have said, they may be reluctant to participate if society thinks they are not responsible enough or able to participate. Their participation may then be limited to what is expected of them. Unfortunately, based on youth's responses, this may not be 'meaningful participation' but rather unproductive.

iv. Engaging youth

According to Milner (2003), the key development in the discourse on civic engagement of youth so far is simply disengagement. Youth are expected to volunteer and participate in community activities as a part of their growing up (Adler and Goggin, 2005). A considerable amount of effort has been invested in recent years in creating incentives to encourage and support engagement among youth.

Youth are often engaged as pawns to be used in varying ways by others. Youth are not usually engaged enough for them to fully participate. Because youth are often marginalized in discussions in society, their voices are left out of the planning process. Thus, we cannot plan for engaging youth if they are not included in the planning. Also, because of this marginalization, adults are not aware and have limited knowledge of young people and of working with them. Engaging youth in society should be more than seeing them as mere pleasantries or menial players. They must be instrumental in all

processes of civic engagement. “Meaningful youth participation involves recognizing and nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels” (McCreary Centre Society, 2002). Thus, inviting a young person to sit on a committee without real capacity to influence decisions is not considered meaningful engagement.

In engaging youth in formal participation, the planning is especially important. When a young person is in a room with adults it could become a scary place to be. In other instances, society does not really extend the invitation to young people. It appears that too often it is a matter of pumping up numbers for funders. Again we see that youth are not usually engaged enough to participate. If outreach and engagement is not done properly, then it does limit participation. Also, if some activities are not youth-specific, then youth are not usually invited to the table. They might be invited if the plan is to build a skateboarding park, but not in wider issues like city politics. Because they do not know, this would limit their participation.

Youth recognized that not all are in a position to be involved. This is reflected in respondent (R4) comments,

I think that probably the last couple of years students and youth have been more involved in society than they have been in the past. Because of what school boards have been trying to do to get them... more community involved and to have the ownership to where they live. So I think that it's getting better, but I don't think that everybody is in a place where they want to participate. (R4).

Youth have the capacity to be civically engaged. They have the capacity to make their homes, communities, schools, and/or society a better place. As positive citizens, youth

are able to provide much needed services as to the community and society, and promoting psychological, social and intellectual growth for youth.

According to Ibrahim (2005), civic engagement is value-driven and provides the human resources necessary for a vibrant civil society. It is an active and collective commitment to achieving the common good for their society (Ibrahim, 2005). If this is true, then why not include youth in that collectivity. When youth are seen as part of the solution, young people’s creativity, values and energy can stimulate positive change in the community. “You have to have the youth sitting down with you and talking, to hear what their problems are... We’re trying to solve something we’re not really sure is a problem” (Milley, 2006).

Furthermore, youth are not talked to about substantive social problems of the city. Youth have the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. It is suggested that youth be allowed to plan and manage their own projects and be involved in local decision-making. Researchers are often impressed by the communicative skills of youth (Frank, 2006). They are articulate and expressive. They are always eager to participate. One respondent had this to say,

Umph...probably local governance. Probably city council, I don’t know if there’s any way I can go to city council. If there is any way we could have a youth city council, where we could go and look at policy development that would affect our community. Where we could go, look at the laws. We could be like a shadow. So I would like to get involved in that. Why, because I think that they are too many issues affecting our community that we have no say in the implementation. All these bylaws have been passed. You can’t do this, you can’t say that. You’ll hear about them when you see or have made an infringement. These people who are making these laws unfortunately won’t be around much longer. But those laws will be around to affect us. So I would want to know, would want to really look into whether or not the laws are made to benefit us or for those who are making it. (R3).

Is giving back to the community only for adults? No! Youth see this as being important to them. Society has in the past and continues to see youth as not being experienced enough to engage in ‘adult’ activities such as decision-making.

2. Discrepancies that Exist Between Society’s and Youth’s Perception of the Barriers to Youth Civic Participation

The discussion that follows will attempt to uncover youth’s motivation for and against participation. It will also show how youth define and conceptualize the barriers that affect their participation and lack of participation. Youth’s understanding of the barriers they face in participating will be compared and contrasted with those of society’s expectations.

Interestingly, the findings of this study suggest that youth characterize the factors that prevent them from participating tend to be personal rather than structural and institutional. As a social worker, I attempt to further examine potential reasons for the absence of the structural barriers (that is recognizable to us as social workers and academics) in the respondents’ comments. Obviously, there were discrepancies in the expectations of the profession based on its understandings of the status of marginalized peoples.

With respect to reasons for their participation, Wharf-Higgins (1999, p. 295) holds, “it is clear that matters such as socioeconomic status and perceptions about being able to make a difference are critical factors in decisions to participate”. In terms of engaging youth, Fletcher (2004) notes that there is still a large number of young people without the necessary education or resources needed to fully participate in society.

However, none of the respondents suggest education or access to resources as a barrier to participation. Instead some of them said they do not have enough time to participate because of school, home, and work responsibilities. As (R4) points out, “some people think that they are too busy, some people don’t want to make time. Some people have busy jobs and it just consumes them.” It is also echoed by (R2) who said she did not have time to do anything other than family and schoolwork.

Is there some invisible thing that prevents youth from participating? Social workers may suggest empowerment. Empowerment helps people to feel powerful, worthy of self-esteem, competent, and also a process of modifying personal and structural conditions to allow people to achieve power and empowerment. It is a term used repeatedly in social work literature and practice. “It is a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment” (Itzhaky and York, 2000, p.226). Jenkins (2005) found that youth do not feel especially empowered to ‘give back to the community’. This is because some youth are not sure about what they receive from the community they are supposed to be giving back to. Respondents mentioned that youth may feel that if they are not going to receive anything from their participation, then they may be reluctant to participate.

i. Official discourse vs. lived experiences of barriers to youth’s civic participation

This section offers findings from conversations with youth on their lived experiences of barriers to their participation. The barriers to youth civic participation are found to be connected to the meaning they attach to the perceived barriers to their

participation. These barriers are perceived to be youth’s personality and attitudes, learned skills, and what they refer to as ‘the self-fulfilling prophecy’.

Meaning attached to barriers preventing youth from participating

Inherent qualities and personality/attitudes

They have other things to do, they don’t want to volunteer their time, it’s not fun. There’s no one else to go with. There’s just like no motivation to do it. There’s no reason to do it except for that 40 hours in high school. There’s no motivation to do it. They don’t seem like they are getting anything out of it. There are people who don’t understand that it’s really good to help. (R2).

The above statement made by respondent (R2) tells how youth view their lack of participation. Respondent (R2) suggests that youth need to be motivated to participate and if this motivation is not there, then they may not readily participate. She assumes that if youth understand that it is good to help others, then they will be more likely to participate in doing so. Some young people may not be readily motivated to participate if there is no benefit to them.

It is normal for human beings to work for a reward, whether it is paid or unpaid work. This is not always the case, but it is less likely the exception. According to Frank (2006), there are several benefits to youth participation. These are:

- (a) youth often appreciate having a voice in public affairs
- (b) youth could feel more connected to their community and the environment
- (c) networking, educational, entertainment
- (d) enhances civic participation

As discussed in the previous section on the meaning attached to the term ‘youth’, I also found that the self-fulfilling prophecy could also be a barrier to youth participation. In response to society’s view affecting youth participation, youth conveyed,

I don’t think they do...I think they say why participate. If you say I’m lazy, I’m going to be lazy. So I think that not a lot of people...there’s people out there that want to turn that around and show that they can be positive influence in society and that not all kids are bad or whatever but I think that most kids are going to think that I am whatever you say I am. (R4).

Therefore, according to the respondent above, if youth are told they are lazy, then some youth may internalize this and thus, act lazy. Consequently, youth may not participate in society if they are not looked at as being ready to participate because they are lazy.

There are varying influences on participation for youth. Youth reported life experiences and parental influence as being important factors affecting youth’s participation. Apart from these outside influences, the youth interviewed also expressed some personal factors that some youth face in determining their participation. This was a significant theme as even within the youth population, youth were creating cliques of participants and non-participants. One respondent mentioned,

I don’t know why a lot of people don’t volunteer. Some people think that they are too busy, some people don’t want to make time. Some people have busy jobs and it just consumes them. So it’s a combination of personal and other things (R4).

Learned skills: communication, open-minded, knowledge of community, initiative, discipline

It was an unexpected finding that youth failed to identify systemic or institutional barriers as being contributing factors to youth’s lack of participation. This absence of these factors may possibly reflect a discrepancy between youth’s comprehension in their lived experiences of what would prevent someone from participating. It is important to note that the voices of youth were being heard in this study and that their comments are truly their own.

One of the major goals of social work is to enhance the quality of life for persons individually, and in organizations, communities, and societies. This is often done through planned social intervention at individual, institutional, and structural levels. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this research is also an attempt to contribute to this objective.

Often, because social work has become institutionalized in our society, the way people care have become commodified (McKnight, 1995). Commodification, weakens a community’s capacity to care. Indeed, this is happening in our communities today. The respondents have all identified a willingness to participate in their communities, even if they were not involved at the time of the interviews. One respondent (R2) had this to say, “Not really! Oh wait, would I like to do, yes. But lacking in time and motivation and I guess other stuff to do. Just my local community.” (R2)

Their definition of community was primarily restricted to their local cities and present living environments. Thus, many communities may become weakened by the invasion of other institutionalized ways of caring. Maybe this explains why some youth

are not participating at the present time, but if given the opportunity minus the reported barriers, they would.

The respondents’ reported barriers to participation appears to conflict with social work’s understanding of possible barriers that exist in society through which marginalized populations have to navigate. What matters in this case, is that our understanding of the way people care and give back to their communities must reflect not only our⁶ way of knowing, but also their way of doing. Our way of knowing may change with the times, but their way of doing may remain constant. Thus, youth who self-identified as being Somalian and Sudanese, reported having barbeques as a way of welcoming newcomers to their communities and to the country. Arguably, this is recognizable as an act of civic participation, as it is giving back to the community and those new to it.

This discussion can be broadened to include the youths’ understanding of the barriers to their participation. Many citizens are not able to realize their citizenship because the welfare state has systemic and structural barriers in place that prevents them from doing so. These people are more often from vulnerable and marginalized populations. Moreover, in the welfare state that is, the principle of collectivism has been thrown out and replaced by an individualist responsibility (Morrow et al., 2004). Because of the welfare state we live in, we would expect that youth would quickly recognize their marginal status in society and be willing to voice all that prevents their

⁶ The use of the word ‘our’ refers to social workers.

participation. Some of which may be limited to social and recreational programs, racism against youth of colour, and economic vulnerabilities of being young people.

As social workers, we would expect to hear more of structural barriers because we see this as being central to the marginalized status of groups such as youth. Because this was not forthcoming in the findings, we may be more willing to create institutional and structural change to correct youths’ lack of perception of the barriers they face. One way of doing this is to educate youth on their marginalized status and the reasons for that status. Based on the conversations with youth, it can be assumed that they would be in a position to correct the social injustice of being on the margins of society by ‘giving back to the community’. Youth had this to say,

Not just that, but I see myself as one who is able to shape my own future. So my participation now is geared towards helping me and my family. So whatever activity I get involved into financially, socially, emotionally is geared towards a greater good, which is a better life, a more comfortable life for me and those around me (R3).

Thus, not being in a position to forge ahead into the core of society may help to refocus their activities to their own communities in the margins. Even though youth may not recognize that they are indeed bypassing the structural and institutional barriers by their ‘giving back to the community’, their actions speak loudly to the cause.

Additionally, as social workers we understand what it means to be on the margins of society. Some academics and others involved in working with marginalized groups would point to social exclusion as being a reason for the lack of youth participation. Social exclusion was first coined in Europe as a result of the inadequacy of existing social welfare provisions to meet changing needs of more diverse populations. It is a

transferable term for almost any country in which people are excluded and alienated from participation in ‘economic, social, political, and cultural life (Saloojee, 2003, p.20).

Walker and Walker (1997, p.8) defines social exclusion as a ‘comprehensive formulation, which determine the social integration of a person in society. Social exclusion may therefore be seen as the denial (non-realization) of the civil, political, and social rights of citizenship”. It is an impediment to successful citizenship articulation.

Consequently, if we were to view citizenship as relevant to all residents of a country or state, then social exclusion would be a barrier to participation. For example, it is apparent that a large number of youth (children) live in poverty. Poverty is both a result and cause of social exclusion. Thus, youth would be socially excluded from society, and because of their poverty, they are not able to actively participate within society (Lundy, 2004). However, overall, the participants did not identify poverty as a direct impediment to their participation. We can substantiate their claims to lack of participation by connecting some of their implied reasons to those inherently linked to social exclusion. For example, some youth reported that they had jobs that occupied their time. Therefore, it can be said that young people who live in poverty or sub-poverty are more prone to be employed to help out their families

Frank (2005) found that there are four major factors, which act as barriers to society’s view of youth. These are the developmental view; vulnerable (to be protected); legal (partial citizen status); and romantic (more creativity, curiosity, and enthusiasm). Findings from the research shows that the romantic view is present in the conversations with youth interviewed. Creativity and enthusiasm is implied when respondent (R3) said

that his involvement in a soccer club was based on a group of youth wanting to do something on a Sunday and so they came together to start a soccer team. They took the initiative and were creative in finding ways of meeting up with neighboring soccer teams and in forming their own league. If anything, the romantic view is more positive of the four and must be encouraged in society. It shows youth's capacity for involvement in the community and in decision-making.

ii. What are the possible solutions to effective youth civic participation and or ways to engage youth in civic participation?

In this section I will explore how some of these findings might inform social workers and those involved in working with youth to effectively engage them in civic participation. Respondents have made some recommendations as to how they would like to know about participation. These include a list of ways to engage youth effectively and meaningfully. Respondent (R5) states, “I would want to be educated in a school setting. I think maybe a practical approach to it. Instead of learning about it in a book, it would be a good idea to go and participate.” Respondent (R8) would rather be taught. And finally, respondent (R2) said, “Someone telling me about it. Shadowing is good.”

First, we must not limit the scope of participation and only see certain ways of participation as ‘desirable’. Rather, youth are themselves the owners of their way of knowing and doing and they will let you know if they are asked. We have seen that the ways they participate may not be defined by them as ‘civic participation’, but rather that after the term is explained to them, they more often than not suggest that what they do is

similar and falls under the term. The issue here is familiarity with the topic, not similarity.

Institutions that are described as places of higher learning have the obligation to develop the knowledge, skills, and values for youth to be active and engaged citizens (Stroud, 2005). The unfortunate, but necessary reality of the last two decades was that institutions of higher education emphasized workforce preparation over the preparation of students to forge lives as active and responsible citizens. When institutions fail, where should youth turn to learn about ways of participating?

In high school it would be nice if somebody came in and spoke to you. I personally had like volunteering and fundraising classes. So I had that, but in high school you don't really have that. So having somebody like guest speakers come and discuss different possibilities. (R4).

During the conversation with respondent (R4), she suggested that she would have liked to learn about civic participation from high school. She mentioned that she did not have this opportunity. Throughout the interviews, this suggestion was reflected in other respondents' comments. The general flow of the conversations on the question of how youth would like to know about civic participation if they knew nothing was that they were ignorant of the definition because they were not told of it in school.

One of the more powerful insights from the interviews was that young people would rather learn by doing. Respondent (R5) reported, “I would want to be educated in a school setting. I think maybe a practical approach to it. Instead of learning about it in a book, it would be a good idea to go and participate.” While this is not revolutionary by any means, it is quite amazing to keep in mind when considering the vast number of

youth programs and activities and other structures designed to engage youth in *discussing* issues and concerns rather than in *doing* something about those issues. In my experience, youth often reported feeling like a token participant in such structures where the decision-making and action clearly lay with the adult ‘advisors’. The respondents in this research project did not lay claim to this experience as most have limited participation in social organizations. It became evident that young people in such roles must not only be allowed to make decisions, but further encouraged to take actions so that they can also make and learn from their own mistakes.

It is also important to recognize that working with youth on a regular basis can be uncomfortable or even somewhat intimidating. Respondents had this to say,

They’ll be more reluctant to participate in what society would fashion to be good stuff. Then again, the generation gap as well. A lot of adults don’t understand us. They don’t understand our music, our way of life. The culture as you know is changed. And what my parents grow up knowing as the perfect norm as what is right and wrong is not necessarily so now. My parents and their generations are the ones who are fashioning the laws and stuff like that in society. But they can’t understand us...they can’t understand our music, it’s difficult for them to understand our lifestyle. So what maybe normal to us, is not necessarily bad, it’s just that they don’t understand it. (R3).

The above youth was very clear in his understanding of the effect that negative connotations has on youth participation. Within that statement, it is implied that adults misunderstand youth and that this needs to be corrected. It is recommended that we work to overcome preconceptions. The following are some of the ways we could consider:

- Allow young people to lead
- Encourage youth to network with their peers (Int.5&6)
- Respect young people’s needs

- Give youth responsibility and voice
- Build youth capacity
- Encourage youthful styles of working
- Involve adults throughout the process
- Adopt the sociopolitical context

This involves having a true and realistic understanding of the material needs of youth. For example, providing bus passes and changing meeting times to fit the schedules of youth. Additionally, as social workers and members of society apt to work and live collectively with young people, we can work towards the following:

First, it is important to help youth to consider their own means of success. Thus, things like being good at caring for others and giving back to the community. This is suggested by respondent (R3), “so whatever activity I get involved into financially, socially, emotionally is geared towards a greater good, which is a better life, a more comfortable life for me and those around me.”

Second, personal attributes, such as ‘what is it you are good at doing?’ regardless of what others think, or where it fits in society are to be considered. Respondent (R4) had mentioned that the activities that she involved herself in are all because she had personal interest in them and also because she feels that she’s good at what she does, which is working with children. She had this to say,

Well right now, I’m waiting to hear back from Big Brothers and Big Sisters. I think that if you have the ability to influence a young person, you could possibly change how they influence everybody else in their lives. Unfortunately, there are kids that don’t have enough love and attention and end up being not the greatest person in society and being part of the negative connotations that you hear about. So it’s really important to me to be involved in youth initiatives. (R4)

Third, it may be necessary to institutionalize young people’s involvement in society. One young man in the research made a very long but brilliant statement about the activities he would like to be involved in. He said,

Umph...probably local governance. Probably city council, I don’t know if there’s anyway I can go to city council. If there is anyway we could have a youth city council, where we could go and look at policy development that would affect our community. Where we could go, look at the laws. We could be like a shadow. So I would like to get involved in that. Why, because I think that they are too many issues affecting our community that we have no say in the implementation. All these bylaws have been passed. You can’t do this, you can’t say that. You’ll hear about them when you see or have made an infringement. These people who are making these laws unfortunately won’t be around much longer. But those laws will be around to affect us. So I would want to know, would want to really look into whether or not the laws are made to benefit us or for those who are making it. (R3).

Therefore, in institutionalizing young people’s involvement, this may mean effectively make changes to local legislations that will give young people a permanent role in local-decision making. This will bolster young people’s confidence that there will be space for other youth to follow in their footsteps.

Limitations of the research

In interviewing participants in this research project, I started to wonder if the topic being researched is really of any significant interest to youth. This is first and foremost an issue that is present in the minds of those in society interested in civic participation and furthering it’s development among citizens. Is this interest self-serving or not? Did they know anything about it? However, because youth were lacking awareness and knowledge of civic participation, this may have limited the findings and hence information relevant to writing this thesis and furthering the research.

Adler and Goffin (2005) remind us that there is always the opportunity for new language to replace or supplement existing terminologies. They note that this may be necessary to account for changing realities and opportunities. This was reflected in respondent (R4) account of her understanding of civic participation.

What do you mean by civic? Define civic..I'm not sure what civic is so I can't answer your question. [CIVIC PARTICIPATION IS EXPLAINED]
I just don't know by that name but yes I know. I belong to two different sports team. I vote. I believe that civic participation is a responsibility is a responsibility to society. I would describe what I do as community recreational involvement. I didn't know the name...I know what it is.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

This paper concludes by reiterating the importance of engaging youth in conversations around their participation in society. The use of in-depth interviews was helpful in garnering information into the lived experiences and everyday realities of youth participation that has not always been captured in the literature. One suggested reason for this is that focus groups, surveys, and questionnaires as methods often used in capturing youths’ voices may not have been able to successfully capture the complexities of youths’ participation. The findings have shown that youth define their participation in various ways that do not always identify with the academic definition of civic participation. Moreover, the reported barriers to participation have been found to be connected to the personal attributes and attitudes of youth, rather than structural and institutional barriers. In terms of ways of engaging youth, several possibilities were given in the last chapter.

As social workers, we need to recognize the importance of this study for engaging youth. ‘Going back to basics’ is one suggested way of engaging youth. Social worker Michelle Shockness of the organization, *Urban Promise Toronto*, sees this as the successful response to engaging youth in at-risk communities—communities plagued by crime and violence in the City of Toronto. They developed a program called the ‘Street Leaders’. This program enables young volunteers 15-19 to give back to the community. Social workers also have a part to play. Michelle Shockness states clearly that social

workers once walked the streets to be among and with the clients in need of service. She sees an element of the success of the program as being “able to humbly connect with our youth” (Shockness, 2006, p.13).

The purpose of youth participation in society must be more than simply to create better politicians, better legislation, or even better learners and workers. The purpose of youth participation must be to create a better society: one that challenges governments to become more democratic; one that challenges democracy to become more authentic; and one that challenges all people to become significantly engaged. One of the respondents (R3) pointed out that he would like people to understand youth. In summary, here is what he had to say,

I like to see more young people involved. People reaching out to us to try and understand us. Trying to understand what we do and how we do. Rather than saying that youths are bad, youth are the cause of violence. Trying to show us the right way because without showing us, we are not going to know. If we don't know we are going to do what we think is right, which might not be necessarily right.

The literature and finding from this research continues to make clear that there is discrepancy in the discussion on civic participation in society today. The inability of youth to understand and further conceptualize the topic points to the need for further research into the issue. From the reported findings of the youth interviewed, it can be seen that the topic of civic participation is not of importance to their daily lives. They voiced an interest in performing in one or more of the varying types of participation, such as volunteering and community involvement. However, that is as far as they understood the term. I encourage those interested in pursuing the topic of youth civic participation to

re-evaluate the basics of civic participation and gain a common and acceptable meaning of the term before they approach youth to participate. If people who are interested in a topic do not have a concrete and/or definable understanding of it, then it becomes redundant to ask others to name it.

Implications for Social Work Research

The interviews in themselves also occasionally offered moments of learning for both the participants and myself. What then are the implications of these findings for social work research?

First, the research methodology used as a way of knowing should take care of the issue of other's ways of knowing. As was shown in this report, a qualitative methodology in research on youth's participation is useful in that it allows for the expression and inclusion of a multiplicity of experiences of youths' voices. However, the methods most often used in such research are focus groups, questionnaires and surveys. This research recommends that in-depth interviews be used more in research on youth civic participation. This is because in-depth interviews allows for more space for youth to express themselves and allow the researcher to delve into the difficulties of youth's experiences in engaging in civic participation.

Second, there are interesting conceptions of participation that has been raised by participants that require further research. One of which is the notion of 'giving back' and the notion of community. The dominant discourse on civic participation is concerning society at large. But those identified by youth regards their community. Youth's notion of 'giving back' as related to community is more specific and grounded in everyday

reality. Therefore, it is being suggested that the notion of community should be further addressed in research on civic participation.

Third, clearly there is a gap in the way youth are engaged in civic participation as defined in the academic and other forms of literature. More often than not civic participation is defined in confining terms to youth and their activities are measured henceforth. The lesson learnt is that this definition should not be imposed. But rather, youth should be inclusive in the discussion on civic participation. This should be addressed by social workers doing work with youth on civic participation.

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APPENDIX B

Project Title: Engaging Youth in Civic Participation

Consent Form

I agree to take part in this study. I have been fully informed about this study and I understand that its purpose is to understand the experiences of youth in civic participation, in particular the barriers to engaging them in participating.

I understand that Shelly-Ann Riley is the principal investigator of this study, and that her work in this study is being supervised by Rick Sin (faculty member of the McMaster School of Social Work).

I am willing to take part in one interview that will last approximately one and a half hours and will agree to have the interview audio-taped and transcribed. No identifying information will be included in the transcripts. There might be a risk involved that you may find distressing if you decide to talk about your involvement with others. I understand that I might find some questions upsetting and I may choose not to answer any particular question and/or may choose to withdraw from participating in this study at any time without consequence. I understand if I choose to withdraw, any information I have provided, including audiotapes, transcripts or notes will be destroyed.

The tapes and transcripts will be kept for up to five years to be used, if necessary, for further probes.

I understand I will not receive any direct benefits from taking part in this project, but my participation will give me the opportunity to voice my concerns on the issue.

I understand that confidentiality is assured. Any information I have provided and that can be identified with me will remain confidential.

I understand if I have further concerns and questions regarding my rights as a research participant, I can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
c/o the Office of Research Ethics
1280 Main Street West, GH-306
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
Email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
Fax: (905) 540-8019

The Principal Investigator: Shelly-Ann Riley
Email: rileysn@mcmaster.ca
Phone: (905) 296-0320
(647) 200-7051

The Faculty thesis supervisor: Rick Sin
Email: sinr@mcmaster.ca
Phone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23785

Name and signature of Participant

Date

Name and signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

1. How do you see yourself in terms of being a youth/young person?
 - a. How would you describe a ‘young person’? **[Probe for ideas of youth’s self-conception and also for general ideas of other youth. Youth may also define themselves/identify for reasons that include age but also culture etc.]**
2. Does your view of yourself as a youth affect your participation/involvement? **[What connotations are attributed to being called youth? What does it mean to participants? How does this connection affect their reasoning for wanting to be involved? Do they feel that as a young person they are not into a position to be involved?]**
3. What activities/events/organizations do you get involved in/with?
 - a. Describe your actual involvement
 - b. Describe those activities/organizations that you would like to be involved with **[An image of where their interest lie and why]**
4. How do you become involved in the above?
 - a. Why do you become involved in the above?
 - b. What skills did you use to navigate/get through to becoming informed and involved?
 - c. Why do other youth not participate like you do? What do you think prevents them from participating **[Probe for knowledge about navigating through resources for participation]**
5. What does civic participation mean to you? **[Probe for understandings of civic and participation]**
 - a. If you know nothing about civic participation, how best would you like to know? For example, would you like to be taught, use a role model, or shadow a person?
6. Are you involved or likely to be involved in your community?
 - a. Which community?
 - b. What type of activities are you involved with?
 - c. Do you see these activities as being a part of civic participation? **[Probe for reasons why they became involved and if not, what barriers they faced]**
7. Have you ever been a part of a focus group or other form of study? Tell me more about that experience.
 - a. How did you feel about that experience? **[Probe for involvement in other research activity]**
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX C

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

RESPONDENTS	AGE	GENDER	RACE
R1	23	Female	Black
R2	21	Female	Chinese
R3	24	Male	Black
R4	23	Female	White
R5	24	Male	White
R6	17	Female	Black
R7	18	Female	Black
R8	20	Female	Black