Wounds of the Gut, Wounds of the Soul

Youth Violence and Community Healing Among Oromos in Toronto

Martha Kuwee Kumsa

Abstract

In this article, I tell the story of a community-initiated and youth-led participatory action research project, which was designed and carried out in the Oromo community of Toronto against the disturbing backdrop of youth violence throughout the city. Although the authorial privilege of this article is given to me, this is a project where youth took ownership of the research and turned a community-initiated project into a youth-led initiative. In telling this story, I alternate between the "we" of the project and my individual voice. I discuss the overview of the findings, particularly highlighting the stories of three critical incidents and the role each played in galvanizing the community, in fragmenting the research team, and in facilitating a more profound understanding of the research findings. I also provide a brief overview of the youth healing project that emerged from the research findings. In the concluding section, I analyze implications for social work policy and practice in relation to broader public discourses surrounding the settlement and integration of newcomers in the era of glocalization, a term coined to describe the unique local effects of global processes.

Keywords: Youth violence • community healing • Oromo youth • Oromo-Canadian • participatory action research • glocalization

Background

In May 2005, a young Oromo man was charged with the murder of his Oromo wife, leaving their 2-year-old son virtually orphaned. Cast against Toronto's escalating youth violence, the tragic news shocked the small Oromo community in Toronto. For many young Oromos and their families, who came to Canada fleeing violence and persecution in Ethiopia, this new tragedy caused them to relive past trauma. Many felt deeply vulnerable. But the murder was just a harbinger of what is waiting to happen. Some young Oromos make it in Canada, but others are experiencing disengagement from schools, substance abuse, suicide, intergenerational conflicts, forced return to Ethiopia, homelessness, untreated trauma, teen parenthood, unemployment and involvement with the justice system.

Concern in the community mounted, as families grieved the adversities that befell their youth. The murder galvanized the community to do something about the predicament of its youth. The Oromo-Canadian Community Association (OCCA) conducted an informal needs assessment (OCCA-GTA, 2005) where elders named "youth-at-risk" as a major community concern and "youth skills training" as the focus of intervention. Despite repeated

calls, however, youth were not coming forward for skills training. The message was loud and clear: *nothing about us without us!*

The name Oromo became a synonym for violence and murder. In an atmosphere thickened with the sexually, racially, ethnically and nationally charged face of the Other, any association with the murderer became risky.

The Project

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) project discussed in this article was initiated when elders realized the need for a participatory approach, in which youth identified their own needs and developed their own strategies of well-being. I was called in to facilitate the process because of my prior research experience with youth-at-risk. Enlisted youth researchers formed the Research Team (RT) along with two Research Advisory Committees—Youth-RAC and Elder-RAC. After refining our conceptual and methodological tools in a series of intense consultation workshops, we adopted the empowerment approach where research became a tool for redressing injustice (Freire 2003; Dullea, 2006; Kennedy, 1996; Lather, 1991; Park, 1993). Youth took ownership and turned the proposed needs assessment into a youth-led project searching for talents rather than deficits. To get to the bottom of what embitters and drives youth to violence, we explored what youth are passionate about and what they are good at. Fired up by the hope of turning things around, youth participated with enthusiasm.

Findings

Alienation emerged as the overarching finding of our research and we identified it as the root of what embitters youth and drives them to violence. We identified five intimately interrelated threads of invisible violence that cut youth off from life-sustaining resources: a) the violence of dislocation and the ensuing alienation from the homeland and its socio-cultural resources; b) the violence of poverty and racism and the ensuing alienation from mainstream Canada and its multicultural global community; c) intergenerational violence and the ensuing alienation from families and communities; d) intra-generational violence and the ensuing alienation from peers; and e) intra-personal violence and the consequent alienation of youth from their own sense of self. All these cut deep wounds. Research participants named them "wounds of the gut," "wounds of the soul." To effect community healing and healthy integration of youth, we realized that our PAR must systematically address all five interwoven threads of alienation.

The transitional phase between research and action became a space of rigorous organizing, resource mobilization, strategic planning and action generation. Youth tapped into resources developed in other communities dealing with similar issues, both within and beyond Toronto. However, some of the hidden barriers youth experienced were unique to the Oromo community. Our findings pointed to two major gaps. The first was the general denial of traumatic pasts trailing youth, as families sought to swallow their own pain and focus on helping their people back home. As a result, youth walked around with unrecognized, undiagnosed and untreated trauma. Second, most Oromo families came to Toronto hoping that Canada would help them in democratizing Ethiopia and believing they would go home soon. Even as the hope of democratizing their homeland faded, however, strengthening the community in Toronto was seen as betraying that hope. As a result, youth experienced a loss of community and a deep sense of

alienation. Youth researchers took the opportunity this project presented to develop creative strategies to address these gaps. Now in its final year, the five-year PAR has observed many achievements and setbacks, but three critical incidents particularly sharpened and deepened our findings.

Critical incidents

In May 2006, exactly a year after the first murder, another tragedy hit us when another young Oromo was charged with the murder of his intimate partner, a young Canadian woman. We lost another life even as we were working hard to prevent just such a tragedy. In this double jeopardy, we also lost to prison the life of a traumatized young man who desperately needed healing. Worse still, he was a participant in our project. Images of a devilish young Oromo murderer with a head full of dreadlocks peered back at us from TV screens, side by side with the beautiful young white Canadian woman whose life was cut short. The name Oromo became a synonym for violence and murder. In an atmosphere thickened with the sexually, racially, ethnically and nationally charged face of the Other, any association with the murderer became risky. Many Oromos responded by distancing themselves from the murderer and denying any relation. The shock and disbelief turned into rage—rage at the young Oromo charged with murder. He was a disgrace to his people.

The rage in the community echoed through our project. We felt betrayed by the young participant who did just what we were trying to prevent. It was an attack on us, and on our efforts. How could he do this to us? We lost sight of his traumatic past and the fact that he was a homeless youth abandoned by everyone. He became an evil offender. This rigid victim/offender binary made it extremely hard for some of us to feel the pain of the victim's family and to grieve the loss of the young Canadian woman and support the healing of the traumatized young Oromo offender at the same time. To add insult to injury, our research coordinator was locked up for petty crime. It was heartbreaking to see such youthful energy disappear into the prison system. Although he told us he was innocent, his imprisonment cast ominous shadows and we felt he was guilty. We felt that he, too, betrayed us in doing just what we were trying to prevent. He was an offender. Breaking the victim/offender binary and showing the inseparable relationship between agency and victimization was beyond our reach.

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As the project struggled on, yet another tragedy struck when a young Oromo died alone, quietly. Police ruled out both homicide and suicide. Doctors couldn't explain his sudden death. How could a healthy young man just drop and die? Police were looking for physical violence; doctors were looking for medial causes. The young man's body showed neither. We were deeply shaken and baffled. Where was the violence here? Who was to blame for the loss of this life? Who was the victim? Who was the offender? With this blurring of the victim/offender dualism, a more profound understanding of violence set in and we moved from blame to responsibility. If the first tragedy galvanized the community and the second one fragmented us deeply, with this quiet death, everything fell into place for our team. The interconnectedness of all forms of violence became visible to us, ironically, through the very invisibility of this quiet form of violence.

Imbued with deeper meanings, violence became signified as any form of injustice,

oppression, or discrimination (Freire, 2003) inherent in everyday practice of power (Ahmed, 2000; Bourdieu, 2001; Foucault, 1982; Chambon, 1999). We found that such sociality and ordinary violence is intimately bound up with people's sense of self and their strategies of well-being (Adelson, 2000; Das, Klienman, Lock, Ramphele & Raynolds, 2001). We understood not only the suffering violence produces but also the human possibilities it simultaneously engenders. Everyday experience of violence is inseparably entwined with subtle means and tacit strategies by which youth subvert, contest, and appropriate violence to facilitate their own healing. We thus came to understand violence and healing as intimately intertwined relational processes of Self and Other, inherent in everyday living.

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Youth healing

Likewise, in Heal and Connect (HAC), the action phase of our project, we experienced healing as a multilayered process of ongoing construction and reconstruction of Self to soothe the wounds of everyday violence. In participants' experiences of settlement and integration, healing is an inseparable twin of making sense of Self and Others, and of developing an identity in relation to Others. Healing involves not only mending from physical injury; it also requires mending from the violation of personhood and hurt Self. Healing is the mending of inequities, injustices and asymmetrical power relations. Invigorated by this sense of community healing, we organized the Oromo Coalition against Youth Alienation (OCAYA) to develop and facilitate HAC programs.

The Coalition developed Heal and Connect into multilayered programs, to address alienation and to connect youth to the multiple spaces of affinity they identified. These programs were organized around the five threads of our findings. First, youth benefit from homework support and mentoring relationships designed to connect them to their career goals and aspirations, and thus to their sense of identity. Second, youth participate in soccer and basketball tournaments designed to connect them to their peers within and beyond the Oromo community. Third, youth engage their families and community elders by organizing cultural and recognition events to tap into relevant ancestral heritage on their own terms. Fourth, youth weave themselves into the Canadian fabric and broader global community by highlighting their reality of poverty and racism through theatre and video. Fifth, youth participate in transnational Oromo conventions to connect with other Oromos back home and around the world.

As running all these programs posed a monumental challenge, the Coalition mobilized human and material resources. The Coalition received its most significant funding from the Youth Challenge Fund (YCF), the fund the Government of Ontario made available for tackling province-wide youth violence. The fund particularly targeted Black youth as the most marginalized of the marginalized, and the Coalition received close to $100,000. This grant marked a turning point in spurring the Coalition into a youth-only space and the project into a youth-led initiative, thus displacing elders and centering and empowering youth.

Settlement and integration in the era of glocalization

By addressing youth violence and connecting youth to multiple places of affinity locally and globally, the five-threaded Heal and Connect programs present far-reaching policy and practice implications for the settlement and integration of newcomers in the era of glocalization. Glocalization signifies the mutual constitution and mutual transformation of global and local processes (Bauman, 1998; Robertson, 1995). Glocal reciprocity is deeply ingrained in the mutual transformation of youth violence and community healing. Placed at the cutting edge of local and global transformation, social work needs to tap into these creative resources. Our challenge, however, lies in developing an understanding that the settlement of newcomers requires shaking up and unsettling our settled ideas and beliefs about settlement and integration (Ilcan, 2002).

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Indeed, our findings are validated by other studies (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007), although the mutual transformation of violence and healing in everyday life seems to be lost. For example, in a high-level Government of Ontario comprehensive review, McMurtry & Curling (2008) locate the roots of youth violence in broader structural marginalization and alienation. Their recommendations also mirror and validate Heal and Connect projects. However, beyond identifying poverty and racism as risk factors, they do not name them as constituting everyday violence in and of themselves. I argue that losing sight of the ordinariness of violence confines policy to the extraordinary spheres. For policy makers to understand the extraordinary and to develop effective violence prevention policies, they need to understand the extraordinary as inseparably intertwined with the ordinary. Moreover, the review does not address the intimate interconnectedness of violence and healing. I argue again that without an understanding of such an intimate relationship, policy is rendered blind to community healing.

In connecting Oromo youth to spaces of multiple transnational affinities (Gow, 2002), Heal and Connect programs question the confinement of integration policy within the Canadian national boundary. Policy needs to reflect the transformation of the nation-state in the contemporary unprecedented global flow of people. In a current conversation on cosmopolitanism, Beck and Sznaider (2010) lament that methodological nationalism is preventing social theorists from thinking beyond their national borders. What they mean is that scholars equate society to nation-state when they must open up research to broader methodological horizons. Commending them for their insights, Glick Schiller (2010) and Soysal (2010) also take them to task on their blindness to issues of power. I concur and argue that Canadian integration policy must break out of its methodological nationalism, but it must do so with equity and justice. A new era has dawned for transnational integration and policy makers must be responsive to newcomers' transnational affinities. They must understand the interconnectedness of local and global violence and find ways of easing the bloodletting in their homeland to heal their gut wounds here. The challenge in the era of glocalization is to find creative ways of riding the tension between nationalism and transnationalism.

Our Heal and Connect programs also contest the individual/community dualism that plagues the Canadian public policy of multiculturalism at the federal level. Abu-Laban (1998) observes that Canadian immigration policy is deeply polarized between integration and multiculturalism. On the integration side, Bisoondath (1994) argues that multiculturalism should be scraped because it is divisive. The only way out of multicultural ghettoes, he asserts, is through individual integration. On the contrary, Kymlicka (1998) argues that multiculturalism offers equal rights and respect for community belonging. Integration is defined as a two-way process where both newcomers and the society adjust to one another (CIC, 2001; Dewing & Leman, 2006; Fleras & Kunz, 2001). Although integration breaks the assimilation/segregation dualism, its two-way process re-inscribes the society/newcomer dualism by equating society to the nation-state. Canada's integration policy must acknowledge that society is much wider than the nation-state for newcomers. It must break the dualism and facilitate multiple layers of integration. Our programs provide examples of multiple spaces of healing and belonging in which individual and collective aspirations are intimately intertwined.

We don't have to go far to demonstrate the dire consequences of such dualism in integration policy. The violence that ravaged Oromo youth is policy dualism playing out in the delivery of social services. Matsuoka & Sorenson (1991) advise that people from Ethiopia should not be considered homogenous and that internal political and ethnic struggles must be considered in order to deliver social services effectively. In her study with African newcomers, however, George (2002) argues that individual newcomer's needs must be taken as fundamental criteria for the delivery of settlement services. I contend that such policy polarity within social work contributes to the sad reality of youth alienation. Youth experience profound loss of community, because individual integration dismisses the need for community belonging, thus marginalizing ethno-specific communities. Meagre funding for social services goes either to country-based agencies like those in the Ethiopian community where Oromo youth face politicized hostility, or it goes to mainstream agencies, where they feel marginalized.

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Social workers must recognize that the challenges facing newcomers today are more complex than ever before. They must be creative in expanding spaces of healing for youth, by tapping into community development resources (e.g., Kudva & Driskell, 2009; Lions Circle, 2005; McGinnis et al., 2007; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Sánchez, 2009; Youth Action Network, 2002; 2005). Social work too must overcome its methodological nationalism and break its policy dualism to reflect the realities of newcomers and facilitate transnational community development. Our research demonstrates the catastrophic impacts of dichotomizing newcomers' needs. We must acknowledge that, as human beings, we need to nurture both our unique individualities and our unique collectivities, because we are unique even in our collectivities.

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