

EXPERIENCES OF REXDALE YOUTH

by

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An MRP

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Social Work

in the Program of

Social Work

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Experiences of Rexdale youth
Master of Social Work, 2014
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This narrative qualitative research study explored the stories of four youth about their experiences of living in Rexdale, a neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario. The stories shared by participants shared showed the similarities, differences, and complexities of the youths' experiences of living in Rexdale. A narrative approach to research was used to collect the data, which are referred to as stories. The theoretical framework draws from critical race theory with an emphasis on the concept of race and space. Data analysis included a thematic and structural narrative analysis. The findings provided insight into what it is like for youth to live in Rexdale. The themes that emerged include: the positive/negative or good/bad binary, defying stereotypes, the portrayal of Rexdale, experiences of living in Rexdale, community resources, potential growth and sense of community. The implications for future social work research and practice are discussed followed by the author's final thoughts.

Key words: Rexdale, youth, portrayals, positive, negative, stereotypes, experiences, community

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a number of people who have supported me throughout this educational experience. Thank you to the various Ryerson University Social Work professors who have helped me along the way and my supervisor Dr. Henry Parada. Thank you to my classmates, friends, parents and brother who have been there for me during this process. Last, but not least, I would like to thank “Rebecca”, “Natalie”, “Irene”, and “Eric” because without their participation, this major research paper would not have been possible.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Major Research Paper to my parents and brother because this would not have been possible without their various types of support. I additionally dedicate this paper to the participants of this study and to all youth that live in Rexdale.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	5
Chapter III: METHODOLOGY	24
Chapter IV: FINDINGS	32
Chapter V: ANALYSIS	50
Chapter VI: CONCLUSION	57
Appendices	60
Reference List	64

LIST OF APPENDICES

	Page
Appendix A – Recruitment Flyer	60
Appendix B – Interview Guide	61
Appendix C – Consent Form	62

CHAPTER I: Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore and collect the counter-narratives of youth describing their experiences of living in Rexdale. The aim of the research was to offer alternative narratives about living in Rexdale that challenge the assumptions, discourses, and stereotypes that have been presented thus far about the community in the media. The research sample included four youth between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four who were interviewed about their experiences of living in Rexdale. Their voices need to be heard so the process of creating alternative narratives can begin. This research was of particular interest to both the researcher and research participants as individuals who have grown up or spent their youth in Rexdale.

Rexdale is located in the northwest area of the City of Toronto and is comprised of the following neighbourhoods: West Humber-Claireville, Mount Olive-Silverstone- Jamestown, Thistletown-Beaumont Heights, Rexdale-Kipling, and Elms-Old Rexdale (City of Toronto, 2014a). The researcher locates herself within the Rexdale-Kipling neighbourhood of Rexdale. The northern part of Etobicoke where Rexdale is located is home to families with a low or medium income (MacDonnell, Embuldeniya, Ratanshi, Anderson, Roberts, & Rexe, 2004).

This major research paper came out of the researcher's frustration with the assumptions held by some that Rexdale is a bad, "gang infested" community. Residents both in and outside of Toronto have these beliefs about Rexdale. These thoughts can be heard when people state which neighbourhoods they want or do not want to live in. In October 2013, Mike Strobel wrote an article about welcoming newcomers to Canada. In this article, he states "come visit me on Manitoulin Island next summer, lest you think Rexdale is the real Canada" (Strobel, 2013, p.10). In making this comment, Strobel (2013) is saying that Rexdale is not a neighborhood that people

should think of when they think of Canada. For myself and the participants, Rexdale is the real Canada since it is where we all live and for some of us, where we also grew up. This study explored the idea there is more to Rexdale than a collection of negative stereotypes.

I have personally experienced questioning based on my neighbourhood of residence, due to my race and the colour of my skin. In conversations, I have been told “You’re white... You can’t be from Rexdale.” There is a perception among people who do not reside within the community that since I am white, I cannot or should not live in Rexdale. This is based on the assumption that the only people who live in Rexdale are racialized. When I have interacted with individuals who do not live in Toronto and they ask “Where are you from?” the next question usually is “Which neighbourhood do you live in?” Before I get the chance to answer, the person will interrupt and say “As long as you do not live in areas like Jane and Finch or Rexdale, you are fine.” These comments infuriate me since they are all based on assumptions.

The author has insider-outsider status in the community which puts them in a unique situation (Humphrey, 2007). To have insider-outsider status means that someone is a member of the population participating in the research, but also the member of an outside community, for example, a university (Humphrey, 2007). I am an insider because I am a member of the same community as the research participants. I am an outsider due to my role as a researcher and my social location. It is important to note that I may or may not share similar identities with the participants, but I could be considered as part of the same population of the study. This is important because various aspects of identity can lead to different experiences of power, privilege, or oppression. I am a twenty-three year old, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class female. These aspects of my identity have led to certain levels of power and privilege. For example, in terms of this major research paper, the stories presented are those of the youth, but

due to my role and status as the researcher, ultimately their stories are presented under my name. This demonstrates the power dynamic between myself and the participants.

An advantage of holding this status is if you are considered an insider by your research participants, they may be more open and willing to share their stories (Humphrey, 2007). A response to the insider-outsider status is to activate the hyphen which is the ability to go between both roles (Humphrey, 2007). The hyphen is the complex and interconnected space between academia and the community involved in the research project (Humphrey, 2007). The idea of the hyphenated insider-outsider status applies to this major research paper because of my relation to the community being discussed and my relation to academia. To activate the hyphen means to recognize its existence and to know when to use both roles as an insider and outsider to their advantage in order to navigate through both the community and academia (Humphrey, 2007). This is something I hoped I achieved by maintaining my connection to the community in order to elicit responses and build rapport with the participants while remembering that my role was to gather the stories of the youths' experiences.

This research project is original because it focuses on youths' experiences of living in Rexdale from the perspectives of the youth. A narrative approach was used to elicit responses and to gather the participants' stories. The participants brought their knowledge and lived experiences to the study by telling stories about their experiences of living in Rexdale. This major research paper aims to complement existing published works about Canadian neighbourhoods and the youth who reside in them (James, 2012b; Smith, Schneider, & Ruck, 2005). This study provides a concrete example of youth's experiences of living in a community that has been labelled a priority area in one of Canada's largest cities (City of Toronto, 2014b). This research addresses a knowledge gap in the literature by using both critical race theory and

the concept of race and space to frame the youths' experiences of living in Rexdale (Alyward, 1999; Henry & Tator, 2010; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Razack, 2002; Sundstrom, 2003; Teelucksingh, 2006). This study might assist social workers employed in underprivileged communities by helping them understand what it is like to live in this type of community from the perspectives of youth.

This major research paper begins with an overview of the existing literature as it relates to this research. Next, critical race theory and the concept of race and space are discussed and how they can be utilized to frame the research. The methodology section includes an overview of narrative research, methods of data collection, profiles of the participants, types of data analyses, the risks associated with the study and the limitations of the research. This is followed by the research findings, analysis and the implications of this major research paper to social work practice. The paper will conclude with the researcher's final thoughts about the research.

CHAPTER II: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

There were four prominent themes in the literature reviewed: youth experiences, effects and perceptions of living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, youth resilience, and community resilience. Toronto neighbourhood reports, various theories used in the literature, and the knowledge gaps were discussed followed by explanations of the theoretical frameworks used in this study. There were quantitative, qualitative and mixed method studies which were mainly Canadian, American, British and Australian. Disciplines present in the literature include: social work, education, law, sociology, psychology, and journals related to youth.

The Ryerson University library databases utilized were: Social Service Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, and ProQuest Research Library. The search terms were: community resilience, youth resilience, youth experiences, priority neighbourhoods, youth and neighbourhoods, and effects of living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The key words were: youth, experiences, neighbourhoods, effects, and resilience. While browsing social work databases, the number of articles found for youth experiences was between twenty-six hundred to over four thousand articles, about three hundred articles for youth resilience, around three hundred to four hundred and fifty articles for community resilience and over a hundred articles for effects of living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.

Articles were selected if they discussed various youth experiences, the effects of living in an underprivileged neighbourhood, and resiliency in terms of youth and communities. Taken into consideration were the years articles were published and if there was Canadian content. Reports which discussed Toronto neighbourhoods were sought. This criterion did not have to be met in one article. The words disadvantaged, priority, and underprivileged are used interchangeably since all were used in the literature to describe types of neighbourhoods.

Youth experiences

A theme found in the literature about youth experience was education. Race was highlighted as a factor that affected youth's educational experiences, specifically the experiences of black male youth (Howard, 2008; James 2012a). In the education system, black male youth are often categorized into stereotypical assumptions such as immigrant, fatherless, troublemaker, athlete, and underachiever (James, 2012a). Black male youth are aware of these stereotypes and of the ways they are perceived by faculty and staff members in the education system (Howard, 2008; James, 2012a). The stereotypical labelling that occurs for racialized youth shapes their experiences in the education system and often negatively affects their education experiences and outcomes (Howard, 2008; James, 2012a). There was also the discussion of the educational experiences of racialized youth who live in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood of Toronto (James, 2012b). Jane and Finch is located near and has similar characteristics to Rexdale (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007).

Despite the negative experiences associated with education, youth also recognize the positive aspects of attending school, specifically obtaining their education in order to have new opportunities and achieve future success (Smith et al., 2005). This is of particular importance because it was found the most reliable way to predict problem behaviour is the youth's perception of minimal prospects for the future (Kingston, Huizinga, & Elliott, 2009). If youth have increased positive feelings towards their education, it will help contribute to their success (Smith et al., 2005). Youth from Jane and Finch used the negative stereotypes of living in that particular community as a motivational factor to achieve academic and social success (James, 2012b).

Another theme was youth experiences with conflict and violence. Violence is an important theme to examine as demonstrated in findings discussed by Morrill, Adelman, Mushen, Bejarano, & Yalda,(2000); Pryor, Rosemary, Bombyk & Nikolovska,(1999); Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, Peak, & Gielen, (2005). Violence occurs in disadvantaged communities (Pryor et al., 1999). Youth had a consistent definition of violence which included verbal disputes, physical altercations and using weapons (Yonas et al., 2005). If youth saw violence in their home, community, or neighbourhood, violence was viewed as an acceptable way to solve problems (Yonas et al., 2005). Youth were concerned with the prevalence of violence in their communities (Pryor et al., 1999).

Violence is a reactive response used by both male and female youth. For example, male and female youth would react to various pressures and intimidation through the use of violence (Yonas et al., 2005). Both male and female youth shared similar reasons for using violence including relationships, respect, gangs or cliques and observing violence (Yonas et al., 2005). Male specific reasons for violence were money and drugs and female specific reasons were rumours and gossip (Yonas et al., 2005).

Youth want the opportunity and appropriate avenues to discuss their personal experiences with violence (Pryor et al., 1999). Narratives are an effective method for youth to share their experiences of violence (Morrill et al., 2000). The narratives youth wrote about their experiences with conflict were analyzed by Morrill et al. (2000). Four types of narratives were found, which were termed as 'tales' by the authors of the study: action, moral, expressive, and rational (Morrill et al., 2000). Action tales describe conflict that occurred due to a disturbance in someone's life, are told in a straightforward fashion and are the most prominent (Morrill et al., 2000). Moral tales describe the consequences of conflict and the decision making process

(Morrill et al., 2000). Expressive tales are reflective and look at how the person felt during the situation (Morrill et al., 2000). Rational tales look at how the individual considers the various options associated with the conflict (Morrill et al., 2000).

Effects and perceptions of living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Along with the potentially negative experiences of education and violence, there can be psychological and physiological effects to living in certain neighbourhoods which can have significant impacts on an individual's physical and psychological health (Brenner, Zimmerman, Bauermeister & Caldwell, 2013). For example, there are stresses related to living in underprivileged neighbourhoods (Brenner et al., 2013). The stresses are in terms of residential segregation, poverty, discrimination, access to resources and opportunities, and feelings of safety (Brenner et al., 2013). Youth who live in these types of neighbourhoods and the situations they may encounter can heighten the body's reaction to stress (Brenner et al., 2013).

Hopelessness is a feeling that is experienced by some who reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Almost half of the males and a quarter of the females surveyed by Bolland and his research team had medium or high levels of hopelessness (Bolland, 2003). These feelings of hopelessness are associated with living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and can lead to youth engaging in harmful behaviours (Bolland, 2003). A risk behaviour prominent in both genders which lead to increased levels of hopelessness was violence (Bolland, 2003).

Related to feelings of hopelessness are feelings of powerlessness. Feelings of powerlessness in the individuals who reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods contribute to neighbourhood unrest and feelings of mistrust (Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2001). It was found that individuals who reside in underprivileged communities have higher feelings of mistrust (Ross et al., 2001). Feelings of mistrust increased in neighbourhoods that had greater levels of crime, vandalism,

hazards, noise and drugs and can also develop from neighbourhood upheaval (Ross et al., 2001). Hopelessness, violence, powerlessness, and mistrust seem to all be connected and possible by-products of one another.

While looking at the effects of living in certain neighborhoods, it is important to examine public perceptions of living in those particular communities and the youth who reside in them (Anthony & Nicotera, 2008; Bolland, 2003; Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). Beliefs about the youth who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are developed from the neighbourhood experiences of adults and youth and their attachment to their neighbourhoods and communities (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). There is a connection between the beliefs about youth who live in urban neighbourhood, adult and youth's perceptions of their neighbourhood, and their level of involvement in their community (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). Furthermore, adults' beliefs about these youth decrease when youth engage in activities usually completed by adults (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002).

Youth's perceptions of their neighborhood and their experiences of neighborhood daily hassles, such as being approached by a drug dealer, are related to the type and number of resources in their neighbourhood (Anthony & Nicotera, 2008). Specifically, there is a relationship between official community supports and the daily troubles youth describe (Anthony & Nicotera, 2008). When more community supports are available, the youth reported less daily troubles (Anthony & Nicotera, 2008). For example, the increased amount of resources for resident support helped decrease the amount of daily inconveniences that youth reported (Anthony & Nicotera, 2008).

Three main areas were identified as needs for urban youth: youth employment ,economic opportunities, sense of community (belonging) (Fogel, 2004). Let us consider the identified need

of youth employment. Youth may experience a phenomenon called ‘post-code discrimination’. ‘Post-code discrimination’ occurs when youth are not considered for jobs because of their address (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). ‘Post-code discrimination’ is experienced by youth who live in certain neighbourhoods that individuals have negative attitudes towards and have been labelled or stereotyped as inadequate places to live (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). The identified need of economic opportunities is linked to the identified need of youth employment because if there are not economic opportunities available to the youth, it will be difficult for them to gain employment (Fogel, 2004). Sense of community will be further discussed in community resilience section.

Youth resilience

While the literature highlights challenges for youth who reside in underprivileged neighbourhoods, hope, courage, and strength are demonstrated through resiliency. Resilience can be understood as the ability to navigate required resources, including personal resources, family and friends (social support), and community resources (Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Cheung, & Levine, 2008). Youth tend to demonstrate imaginative and resourceful means to address obstacles they encounter, in this way it reflects the unique nature of their personal resiliency (Ungar et al., 2008).

While resiliency is discussed as a quality unique to the individual, there are particular indicators that contribute to the level of resilient tendencies (Tiet, Huizinga, & Byrnes 2010). In one study, the resilience of youth was predicted through the analysis of statistical data (Tiet, et al., 2010). Resilience was predicted through how youth connected with their families and teachers, their participation in extra-curricular activities, decreased levels of parental conflict, less stressful life events and a reduced association with youth who may have a negative influence

on their life (Tiet et al., 2010). Increased ability to change and a decreased level of disruptive behaviour in youth can contribute to resilience (Tiet et al., 2010). Higher levels of functioning in youth regardless of their place of residence also increased resilience (Tiet et al., 2010). It was also found that resilience can promote additional resilience (Tiet et al., 2010).

Youth networks seem to have a greater impact among female youth by providing the skills to handle aspects of disadvantage (Bottrell, 2009). Friends and fellow members of the youth network were able to offer support due to their awareness and familiarity with various resources (Bottrell, 2009). The observation of these youth networks uncovered features that defy the negative stereotypes of youth being intimidating, troublesome and uncontrollable (Bottrell, 2009).

Mental wellness also contributes to the level of resiliency in youth (Ungar et al., 2008). Youth are considered to be resilient based on their level of access to seven mental health improving experiences called ‘tensions’ (Ungar et al., 2008). To label these experiences as ‘tensions’ enables a new way to view the experiences of resilient youth (Ungar et al., 2008). These seven tensions are: access to material resources, access to supportive relationships, development of a desirable personal identity, experiences of power and control, adherence to cultural traditions, experiences of social justice, and experiences of a sense of cohesion with others (Ungar et al., 2008). In other words, resilience in youth is dependent on how youth can overcome these tensions and obtain resources (Ungar et al., 2008).

Community resilience

A factor that can contribute to the resiliency of youth is the resiliency of the community in which they live. Community resilience is a community’s approach of responding to hardships (Ungar, 2011). It can be defined as a community’s “social capital, physical infrastructure, and

culturally embedded patterns of interdependence that give it the potential to recover from dramatic change, sustain its adaptability, and support new growth that integrates the lessons learned during a time of crisis” (Ungar, 2011, p.1742). Community resilience can be conceptualized as a set of capacities and a strategy for disaster readiness (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). After a major event, such as a natural disaster or catastrophic event, community resilience can connect people to resources to assist with the adjustment period after the incident (Matarrita-Cascante & Trejos, 2013; Norris et al., 2008).

The following discusses specific attributes of resilient communities in terms of context and collective participants (Chaskin, 2007). When considering context, the emphasis is on how communities have certain factors that can affect the safety, health and happiness of the community residents (Chaskin, 2007). The context aspect also examines how various factors can increase and decrease resilience within communities (Chaskin, 2007). Collective participants can be understood as how the community itself can be resilient and react to hardships (Chaskin, 2007).

Part of community resilience is the community’s ability to care for their underprivileged and susceptible residents (Ungar, 2011). A shared resilience can be developed through alleviating risk, decreasing the disproportion of resources, involving residents, making connections with organizations, enhancing and keeping social supports, and understanding that having a strategy is not always necessary (Norris et al., 2008). A community’s resilience is reliant on the fair movement of goods and services, access to financial resources, the connections between residents, and the ability of local establishments to adjust accordingly when change occurs (Matarrita-Cascante & Trejos, 2013).

An aspect of a community's resilience is an individual's sense of community (Norris et al., 2008). McMillan & Chavis (1986) proposes four elements that create a sense of community which are: membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection. Membership is one's belonging to a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Influence is one's significance to the community, if the community is significant to its members and ability to create change (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Reinforcement is community members' necessities will be fulfilled through their affiliation with the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Shared emotional connection is when residents of the community share a mutual history and experiences, and spend time together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the following, youth's sense of community will be explored.

A concept linked to sense of community is place attachment (Tartaglia, 2006). Place attachment has been conceptualized as an individual's feelings and experiences towards a certain space (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Furthermore, place attachment can be thought of as one's inner connection to their neighbourhood or city and is partially separate from the relationships with people who reside in the neighbourhood or city (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Part of place attachment is someone's length of residence in a particular place (Tartaglia, 2006). The concept of place attachment will be explored when the youth are asked to describe a place of significance to them that is located in Rexdale and how long they have resided in Rexdale.

The resilience of a community is dependent on its ability to look after its most susceptible residents (Ungar, 2011). Communities can help individuals become resilient through the development of five principles: an ecological perspective, facilitated navigation, facilitated negotiation, differential impact, and complexity (Ungar, 2011). An ecological perspective is how the physical and social environment plays a larger role in a community's resilience than

only the individual characteristics of its residents (Ungar, 2011). Facilitated navigation can be described as when community members work together to guide individuals to obtaining resources, a community can become more resilient (Ungar, 2011). The individual and the individual's family will also become more resilient as the community helps them acquire resources (Ungar, 2011). Facilitated negotiation is when community members discuss and make compromises in terms of the resources they require, resilience will continue to grow within the individuals, their families and the community (Ungar, 2011). Differential impact can be understood as levels of marginalization increase for someone, resources will have a greater impact on that individual (Ungar, 2011). This means that if an individual experiences various levels of marginalization, receiving resources will make a greater impact on that person's life than someone who does not experience marginalization (Ungar, 2011). Complexity is how fostering resilience involves participating in intricate, interdependent processes that permit multiple resources to be offered throughout time (Ungar, 2011). This means that developing resilience is ongoing and involves various interconnected processes (Ungar, 2011).

Reports on Toronto neighbourhoods and Toronto neighbourhood assessment tool

The amount of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Toronto is increasing (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007). Jamestown located in Rexdale, starting in the northwest end of the city when viewed on a map, is part of the "U" shaped outline of disadvantaged neighbourhoods that encompass Toronto (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007). These neighbourhoods have increased poverty and unemployment, and do not have the proper amenities or community supports (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007). During the period of 1970-2000, Jamestown, among other Toronto neighbourhoods, had more than a twenty percent reduction in employment income (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007). These neighbourhoods have started to emerge

as racially and ethnically divided (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007). There are also concerns with regards to education, health and overpopulation (Toronto City Summit Alliance, 2007).

The report titled “Poverty by postal code” discusses the rise of the amount of poor neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto between the years of 1981 to 2001 (MacDonnell et al., 2004). The report discusses how in 1981, only four neighbourhoods were identified as having ‘very high’ poverty rates and that the one of these neighbourhoods was the Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown neighbourhood (MacDonnell et al., 2004). As previously stated, the Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown neighborhood is located in Rexdale (City of Toronto, 2014a). During that twenty year time span, the levels of poverty rose in the northern neighbourhoods of Etobicoke which would include Rexdale (MacDonnell et al., 2004).

In 2005, through the Neighbourhood Action Plan, the City of Toronto designated thirteen ‘Priority Areas’ (City of Toronto, 2014b). One of the thirteen neighbourhoods selected was Jamestown (City of Toronto, 2014b). The designation of being labelled a priority neighbourhood can be viewed in both a negative and positive light. On the positive side, these neighbourhoods receive extra supports and resources while working in collaboration with the residents of these neighbourhoods (City of Toronto, 2014c). On the negative side, being ascribed the label of a priority neighbourhood can bring further stereotypes, stigmatization and separate these neighbourhoods from the rest of the city (Chatterton & Bradley, 2000).

In early 2014, these neighbourhoods were renamed ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Areas’ and an updated list of ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Areas’ will be released in 2014 (City of Toronto, 2014b). Three of the proposed neighbourhoods are located in Rexdale: Elms-Old Rexdale, Thistletown-Beaumont Heights, and Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown (Doolittle,

2014). As previously stated, Jamestown has already been identified (City of Toronto, 2014b). Elms-Old Rexdale and Thistletown-Beaumont Heights would be additions to the list.

The City of Toronto is now using the Urban Health Equity Assessment and Response Tool (Urban HEART), originally developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), to determine which neighbourhoods will be designated as ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Areas’ (City of Toronto, 2014d). Urban HEART is an evidence-based tool to assist cities with responding to health and social inequalities and can be utilized by professionals from various fields (Centre for Research on Inner City Health, 2014a). Urban HEART uses data collected from several organizations to assess neighbourhood equality through six policy domains (Centre for Research on Inner City Health, 2014a). The six policy domains are: Physical Environment and Infrastructure, Social and Human Development, Economic Opportunity, Governance, General Population Health, and Disease-Specific Concerns (Centre for Research on Inner City Health, 2014a).

Urban HEART @ Toronto has been implemented through a partnership with WHO and the Centre for Research on Inner City Health (CRICH) run by St. Michael’s Hospital (Centre for Research on Inner City Health, 2014a). Urban HEART @ Toronto utilized five of the six domains, excluding disease-specific concern and utilized fifteen indicators related to the five domains to assess Toronto neighbourhoods (Centre for Research on Inner City Health, 2014b). The scores from these indicators will determine if a neighbourhood can be designated as a ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Area’. The findings and designation of the new ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Areas’ will affect all neighbourhoods in Toronto, including those in Rexdale.

Once a neighbourhood is designated as a ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Area’, the City of Toronto will work in collaboration with the community members, businesses and service

providers to create the change needed to develop and enhance the neighbourhood for all its residents (City of Toronto, 2014c). The designation of a 'Neighbourhood Improvement Area' to neighbourhoods in Rexdale may change how the neighbourhoods are viewed or it could further stigmatize a community that has previously been labelled and stereotyped. The designation may also change how the youth think about and describe the community in which they reside. If the list of proposed neighbourhoods is approved, this will mean that three of Rexdale's five communities would be designated as a 'Neighbourhood Improvement Areas'. The designation would have important consequences for the broader community of Rexdale in terms of collaboration, support and resources. Ultimately what is at stake here is a community in Toronto's northwest end.

A variety of theories and models were utilized in the literature. Theories of community development and youth civic engagement were used to discuss what youth require to be involved in their community (Fogel, 2004). Youths' experiences with conflict were analyzed through a youth centred perspective (Morrill et al., 2000). Critical race theory was used to explore the experiences of black male youth in educational settings (Howard, 2008; James, 2012a).

Theories relevant to the study of neighbourhoods were social disorganization theory and theories related to neighbourhood disorder and mistrust (Kingston, Huizinga, & Elliott, 2009; Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh & 2001). Social disorganization theory describes how factors like socio-economic status and family dynamics can result in social disorganization which can cause problem behaviours and instability (Tiet et al., 2010). The theory suggests that neighbourhood factors affect youths' development separately from individual and family factors and acknowledges the multiple factors that can impact a neighbourhood's stability (Tiet et al., 2010).

A combination of ecological and biopsychosocial models were used to explain the effects of living in certain neighbourhoods (Brenner et al., 2013). A biopsychosocial model supports the idea that youth's awareness and observation of their own neighbourhood and psychological stress can facilitate the link between neighbourhood worries and physical manifestations of stress (Brenner et al., 2013). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping explores how the link between vulnerability to neighbourhood worries and the hormone cortisol may be aided through coping, support systems and health behaviours (Brenner et al., 2013). These models are not necessarily applicable to social work, but are still useful.

There are some knowledge gaps in the literature. Most of the literature reviewed focused on American, rather than Canadian neighbourhoods. This means the literature does not necessarily reflect the reality of Canadian neighbourhoods. One has to consider if the literature on underprivileged American neighbourhoods can be generalized to underprivileged Canadian neighbourhoods. Some of the findings may be applicable to Canadian neighbourhoods because they share similar characteristics, however each country may have a different understanding of what constitutes an underprivileged neighbourhood.

Both the United States and Canada have a history of slavery, colonization and racism (Naiman, 2008). There are also differences in health and social policy across both countries which may affect how neighbourhoods are assessed. There are differences in terms of the assessment tools, indicators or factors examined in order to assess a neighbourhood (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Many of the factors and indicators are linked and also overlap (Sampson et al., 2002). In a review of over forty articles examining American neighbourhoods Sampson et al. (2002) identified four types of neighbourhood mechanisms that could be found: social ties/interaction, norm and collective efficacy, institutional resources and

routine activities. Other factors and indicators that are examined are: crime, activation of social ties, social mechanisms and health, concentrated poverty, neighbourhood disorder and structural characteristics (Sampson et al., 2002). Sampson et al. (2002) emphasize that there are differences in research design and measurement in terms of the methodologies used in these studies.

The Canadian assessments of neighbourhoods appeared to have a focus on health, including mental health. In their report, Pickett, Janssen & Rosu (2012) discussed the various physical, social and economic factors that help define the various neighbourhoods they examined. The physical factors were: congestion, land use, and accessibility to local amenities (Pickett et al., 2012). Social factors were: crime, issues related to race and religion, the overall appearance of the community and the presence of gangs, alcohol, and drugs (Pickett et al., 2012). Economic factors are: levels of education, income levels, property ownership (Pickett et al., 2012). This shows that there are some similarities and differences in terms of what the United States and Canada examine while assessing neighbourhoods.

Another knowledge gap in the literature is in terms of youth's experiences. The experiences presented focused on specific experiences, not on the overall experience of living in a certain neighbourhood. Again, one has to wonder if these findings about youths' experiences can be generalized to all youth. These findings may not be applicable since each youth may experience a phenomenon differently.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is critical race theory (Alyward, 1999; Henry & Tator, 2010; Parker & Lynn, 2002) along with the concept of race and space (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Razack, 2002; Sundstrom, 2003; Teelucksingh, 2006).

Critical race theory developed from the legal discipline (Alyward, 1999). The two key founders of critical race theory are Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Critical race theory places race as the central theme of critical analysis (Alyward, 1999, James 2012a). The theory explores how race and racism operate in the legal and social worlds (Alyward, 1999; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

There are three central objectives of critical race theory (Parker & Lynn, 2002). One objective is to highlight storytelling and narrative as effective approaches to critically analyze race and racism in law and in the social world (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The second objective is to fight for the elimination of racial oppression while also identifying that race is a concept developed by society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The third objective is to make connections between race and other systems of oppression (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

There are some basic tenets of critical race theory. One tenet is that racism is normal in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Since racism is so entrenched into our society, it is viewed as something that is commonplace and accepted (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). One way critical race theory attempts to defy racism is through the use of storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). This study uses a narrative approach to tell the youths' stories of living in Rexdale.

Another tenet is 'interest convergence' which was developed by Derrick Bell (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Interest convergence states "that white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p.xvii). It has been argued that 'interest convergence' occurs so any advances transpire at the right pace, not too fast because it would disturb society, but also not too slow, since it could create instability (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

An additional tenet of critical race theory discussed by Matsuda (as cited in Alyward, 1999) is that the legal realm has not fully taken into account the reality of race and racism in the world and how the law is a function of and upholds racism. Critical race theory involves deconstructing the legal guidelines and policies and how they affect non-white individuals (Alyward, 1999). This process of deconstruction allows for the questioning of the impartiality and fairness of the law (Alyward, 1999).

Critical race theory can be viewed as a response to racism in the legal and social realms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Solorzano and Yasso (2002) state how “critical race theory advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (p.25). Part of this strategy of reconstruction is to offer alternatives to a belief or practice (Alyward, 1999). This is relevant to the research project since one of the aims of the study is to offer counter-narratives of youth’s experiences of living in Rexdale.

Critical race theory attempts to authorize and authenticate the experiences of racialized individuals (Alyward, 1999). Critical race theory has had significant effects on qualitative research involving racialized individuals and research surrounding education and youth culture (Parker & Lynn, 2002). This is a reason why the author chose critical race theory as the main theoretical framework for this study since it is examining the experiences of racialized youth.

Related to critical race theory is the notion of race and space. Social space is the space of our daily lives and what we experience each day (Sundstrom, 2003). Space is a social product that appears to develop naturally and so do the people who populate these spaces (Razack, 2002). According to Razack (2002), there is the idea of “how bodies are produced in spaces and how

spaces produce bodies” (p.17). In other words, space can be viewed as an entity that is made by society and how this entity of space can create the individuals who inhabit said space (Razack, 2002). Space can also be seen as an entity that can be filled or be viewed as empty (Razack, 2002). This view of space as something that needs to be filled or something that is empty portrays space as innocent, however, space is not innocent (Razack , 2002).

Various social structures are present in spaces and certain spaces have the power to control who has access to that particular space (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). Individuals also have the power to generate space to incorporate their best interests (Teelucksingh, 2006). How space can be reproduced consists of examining the various organizational, governmental, and economic processes in society.

Race and space is connected to the idea of ‘know your place’ (Sundstrom, 2003). The concept of ‘know your place’ describes how one ought to know their social location and their spatial location in society (Sundstrom, 2003). In other words, place can be conceptualized as both a geographic and social entity (Sundstrom, 2003). Thus, a person’s place is a combination of their geographic location and their affiliation to society (Sundstrom, 2003).

Teelucksingh (2006) describes the idea of racialized spaces which “considers the hegemonic social relations between racialized people and dominant groups and institutions that impact on the uneven development of racialized people and their communities” (p.10). Dominant ideologies that emphasize difference in spaces contribute to the degradation of spaces or places linked to racialized people (Kobayahsi & Peake, 2000). Spaces that subordinate racialized individuals are not blatantly obvious since social spaces are part of our everyday lives which make it possible to normalize racism (Teelucksingh, 2006). Racialized spaces do not only consist

of placing racialized individuals in separate spaces, but also the assignment of everyone to certain places (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000).

One has to examine how individuals come to understand themselves in and throughout spaces and as part of various structures of oppression (Razack, 2002). To interrogate how spaces are created, how spaces are produced, and what is produced by these spaces allows one to disturb familiar ideas (Razack, 2002). This research project will examine how the youth describe their social space in Rexdale and if they feel connected to their community.

The current literature does not examine youths' experiences as they relate to critical race theory and the concept of race and space. This study can assist with partially filling a knowledge gap in the literature. The theoretical frameworks guided this major research paper in terms of the lens used to analyze the findings. Critical race theory guided the research by using storytelling as a method to present narratives of the youths' experiences. The use of critical race theory also guided the research in terms of examining how race interacted with other identities and shaped the participants' experiences. The concept of race and space was used to examine what youth said were significant spaces to them in Rexdale and how certain areas were defined as racialized spaces.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

A narrative approach is utilized in this research study in order to best capture the youth's experiences of living in Rexdale. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) argue that "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p.18). A narrative approach examines the stories of the lived experiences of an individual or small group of people, and the meaning that someone gives to a particular experience (Creswell, 2007).

A narrative approach does not require a large sample size and is best suited for gathering in depth, comprehensive stories (Cresswell, 2007). Stories are a significant aspect of making meaning, as well as an important aspect of critical race theory (Fraser, 2004; Parker & Lynn, 2002). As previously stated, critical race theory is one of the theoretical frameworks for this research study. An aspect of narrative research is restorying which is "the process of reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework" (Creswell, 2007, pg. 56).

The narrative interview should be viewed as a conversation a partnership between the researcher and research participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Riessman, 2008). A narrative approach requires the researcher to let the participants direct the interview and tell their story (Riessman, 2008). The researcher must recognize the key role they play in constructing the data presented, which is the participants' stories (Riessman, 2008). Ultimately, the researcher is presenting the participants' stories and should ensure they are not misrepresented (Riessman, 2008). By having an unstructured, flowing, informal dialogue, the interview was made into a conversation. The measures that were taken to represent the stories were to include the language the participants used and ensure their thoughts, feelings, and opinions were expressed.

Counter-storytelling will be utilized in this research study as an approach to present the youths' stories. Counter-storytelling is a methodology of critical race theory and can be defined

“as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002, p.32). The form of counter-story that will be utilized in this major research paper is ‘Other People’s stories or narratives’ (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002, p.33). This type of counter-story uses a third-person perspective and explores the experiences of individuals (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002).

There are four functions of counter-stories. Firstly, counter-stories can help form community between individuals who are marginalized (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Secondly, counter-stories attempt to unsettle the notions of society’s most powerful people (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Thirdly, counter-stories can expose new realities for marginalized individuals (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Lastly, the combination of both the story and the present reality can build a world having more depth than either element on its own (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Counter-storytelling must not be confused with fictional storytelling (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Counter-storytelling involves characters and situations created from everyday experiences (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). This research project will help explain and present the everyday experiences of youth living in Rexdale.

Counter-storytelling uncovers, examines, and contests the mainstream stories of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Mainstream stories are created from a history of racial privilege and can be thought of as a dominant narrative (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002) It is important to acknowledge the power of White privilege in the formation and production of stories about race (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Solorzano & Yasso (2002) state that “storytelling is racialized, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialized, gendered, and classed communities” (p. 31).

An important aspect of creating counter-stories is theoretical sensitivity (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Strauss & Corbin (as cited in Solorzano & Yasso, 2002) discuss that theoretical sensitivity is a personal attribute of the researcher. Strauss and Corbin (as cited in Solorzano & Yasso, 2002) state theoretical sensitivity is “the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t” (p.33). This is important because it allows the researcher to enhance their awareness and further develop their research (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002).

The research question for this study is: What are the counter-narratives of youth describing their experiences of living in Rexdale? The three objectives of the research are: to explore the stories of youth about their experiences of living in Rexdale, to develop a portrait of the Rexdale community through the use of the youths’ stories, and to offer alternative narratives about living in Rexdale that challenge the dominant stories that prevail in describing this community.

The recruitment process involved the creation of a recruitment flyer (see Appendix A). Once the project received ethics approval, the researcher approached various community centres, community agencies, and a community hub which are all located in Rexdale that serve youth. Subsequently, the recruitment flyers were posted in these community agencies and community centres in Rexdale. This research used criterion sampling. Criterion sampling utilizes a predetermined set of criteria in which participants must meet (Creswell, 2007). Contact was made via email and was initiated by interested youth. Selection criteria included being between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four and who also self-identified as living in Rexdale. Once recruitment occurred, a research location, date and time were set to complete the one-to-one interview.

Four youth were interviewed about their experiences of living in Rexdale. The participant's ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-four. This is consistent with the definition of The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which define youth as anyone between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four (UNESCO, 2013). Three females and one male youth participated. The youth were selected based on selection criteria determined by the researcher. The youth had to self-identify as living in Rexdale and be between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four. It is important to include youth in research about themselves and placing value on their contributions to research (Fogel, 2004; Ungar, 2008). There has been a shift towards focusing on what knowledge and experiences youth can offer (Fogel, 2004). Here is a brief profile of each participant. The names listed below are pseudonyms.

Participant 1 (Rebecca):

Rebecca is twenty-four years old and has completed college. Rebecca has lived in Rexdale for more than twelve years. Previously, Rebecca stated she lived in the Jane and Finch community and currently identifies as living in the Mount Olive neighbourhood.

Participant 2 (Natalie):

Natalie is eighteen years old and is currently in university. Natalie has lived in Rexdale for her whole life. Natalie identified as living in the Humberwood neighbourhood of Rexdale.

Participant 3 (Irene):

Irene is twenty-one years old and is currently in university. Irene has lived in Rexdale for approximately eight years. Irene identified as living in the Islington/401 area of Rexdale.

Participant 4 (Eric):

Eric is twenty-three years old and has completed university. Eric has lived in Rexdale for almost his whole life, approximately twenty years. Eric currently identified as living in the Finch and Albion neighbourhood, but said he had previously lived along Kipling Avenue.

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with the research participants using an interview guide (see Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow for new ideas and topics to surface during the interview process, but still allow for the researcher to have a set of themes or questions explored (Creswell, 2007). It allows for a more in-depth conversation with the research participants about their experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded. Prior to conducting the interview, the youth had to sign a consent form which indicates permission for their voices and stories to be recorded. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to fully explain their responses to the questions.

All transcripts were transcribed verbatim and the researcher went through the interview transcripts line by line. A narrative analysis is more than simply the content, it also involves questioning “intention and language – how and why incidents are storied” (Riessman, 2008, p.11). A narrative analysis involves looking at the similarities and differences between the stories told by research participants (Fraser, 2004). This allows for the researcher to make links between the various research participants’ stories (Fraser, 2004).

Thematic and structural narrative analyses were completed to analyze the data. A thematic analysis involves focusing on the content, of ‘what is said’ (Riessman, 2008). The language participants used was included in this study, no alterations to their wording were made. This type of analysis involves reviewing each transcript and attempting to order the information into a chronological order (Riessman, 2008). Part of the analysis requires taking large sections of conversation and creating a story or narrative (Fraser, 2004). After each transcript has been reviewed, the researcher identifies the themes and codes the data (Riessman, 2008). Selected parts of the narratives can be chosen to show the patterns in the research and allows for the different stories to be compared (Riessman, 2008).

A structural analysis focuses on ‘how’ the individual is describing their experience (Riessman, 2008). A structural analysis allows for researchers to question the language speakers use to construct themselves and their stories (Riessman, 2008). An aspect of the structural analysis involves making note of the pauses and silences during the interview because it could mean the individual was trying to emphasize what they were saying or perhaps were having difficulty expressing what they wanted to say (Riessman, 2008). The author took note of this by writing in the pauses, silences, and laughter in the transcripts. To fully comprehend the meanings of people’s experiences and what was said involves a thorough analysis of how the story was told (Riessman, 2008). The completion of a structural analysis allows for the researcher to explore and discover meanings that could be missed if the analysis focused only on ‘what’ is being said instead of also including how the person tells their story (Riessman, 2008).

Overall, the risk is minimal to research participants. There are slight psychological, social, and legal risks. The psychological risk to individuals participating in this study is the interviews may bring up past negative experiences. The social risk to participants in this study is due to the fact that the research will be completed in the participant’s community. There was the chance that other community members would see the researcher and the research participants together. The legal risk is if a research participant discloses information that has legal implications. The researcher has the duty to report instances of child abuse or neglect, if the participant wants to harm themselves or others, or if they have or if they are going to commit a crime. This is all discussed in the consent form for the research project (See Appendix C). The psychological risk was managed by providing participants with a list of local social service agencies in the event that they wanted to speak to someone about something brought up during the interview. The social risk was managed by ensuring audio and visual privacy during the interview. The legal

risk was managed by outlining in the consent form and verbally telling the participants about the duty to report and ensuring they understood what it meant.

It was described in the consent form and was discussed in person with the research participants that participation in the research project was voluntary. It was explained to the participants they had the right to not answer questions, to stop the interview process at any time and ask that the information they provided not be used in this major research paper.

Pseudonyms were used to identify the research participants. The pseudonyms were determined by the researcher. In order to keep the information provided confidential, only the principal investigator had access to the audio-recorded interviews and consent forms. The data will be stored in a locked storage location that only the principal investigator will have access to. The data will be destroyed after a period of up to two years and the audio-recordings will be destroyed approximately six months after the Major Research Paper has been submitted.

The findings will be made available to the participants, Ryerson University and to agencies who work with youth in Rexdale upon receiving approval for this major research paper. The author will let the participants know when the final version of the paper is complete and will be given the option to view the final paper. The author would like to present the findings of this paper to various agencies who work with youth in Rexdale.

It is important to consider the limitations of this study. A limitation is the small sample of youth interviewed for this study. The author acknowledges that due to the small sample size, it is not a diverse representation of youth's experiences of living in Rexdale. Another limitation is in terms of the gender of the youth interviewed. Three out of the four participants were female so there is less of a male representation in the experiences presented in this paper. Due to the author's social location and being a resident of the community examined, there may be a bias to

her interpretation of the data. Perhaps future research could look into interviewing more youth and to have an equal representation of the voices of both male and female youth in Rexdale.

Some markers of identity absent from the discussion during the interview were disability and gender. Other markers of identity such as race and ethnicity were mentioned and the participants are racialized youth, but race did not seem to have a large impact on the participants. The author thought race would have played a larger role in how the youth experienced Rexdale. Sexuality was briefly discussed in terms of the lack of LGBT services for youth in Rexdale. Perhaps these various markers of identity were not brought up in participants' responses due to the questions asked by the author. Future research could focus on the various markers of identity. For example, a future study could look into the experiences of youth in Rexdale who identify as LGBT community. Future studies could specifically explore how race may affect someone's experience of living in Rexdale. A final limitation was access to youth who live in Rexdale. The researcher experienced difficulty during the recruitment process of the study.

CHAPTER IV: Findings

The following paragraphs will discuss the similarities and differences between the youths' experiences of living in Rexdale and what themes were discovered. The themes present in the findings are: the positive/negative and good/bad binaries, defying stereotypes, the portrayal of and experiences of living in Rexdale, community resources, potential growth and sense of community.

Youth's descriptions of Rexdale

The participants described Rexdale as just a regular community that has both positive and negative aspects. Overall, the youth described having good, positive experiences of living in Rexdale. In the participant's eyes, Rexdale does not fit the stereotypes types that are depicted in the media.

Rebecca offered a unique description of Rexdale that the author had not heard before. Rebecca described how there was a 'pretty' and 'ugly' side to Rexdale. Rebecca described the 'pretty' side of Rexdale as the southern end of Rexdale which has homes where the residents own their property. The 'ugly' side was described as the northern part of Rexdale where more apartments are located. Rebecca stated:

"You can see the Italians, you can see uh the South Asians, you'll see the Jamaicans, you'll see different classes there, but they're the residential side, so they're the side that owns property so it's the 'pretty' side of Rexdale and then if you look on the other side, the north side, you see, you do see the same multicultural, umm multicultural groups, but it's the 'project' groups. So it's kind of like if you were to look at the darks side and the light side. Mhmm."

Both Natalie and Irene described Rexdale as being a 'family oriented' place. Both participants felt that the activities that were available in Rexdale were good for families. When asked why she thought Rexdale was a 'family oriented place', Natalie stated:

"Uh, I'd have to say the facilities nearby. There's a hospital, there's a park, right beside

and like bike trails right beside umm my house. There's also a really big soccer field, there's like an elderly, like seniors home, my school uh there's a mall nearby. Umm a theatre, Rainbow Cinemas or whatever, yeah."

Irene thought Rexdale was a 'family oriented' place because: "like it's close for example, like neighbourhoods are so close to like groceries, to the bus stops, and like I feel in that way, like it's really good." This means that the participants thought of Rexdale as a 'family oriented' place because of the various amenities that are located in the community. To think of Rexdale as a 'family oriented' place was another description of Rexdale that the author had not previously considered.

Rebecca described Rexdale as being comprised of various people with a lot of different personalities. Specifically she described two types of people that she sees living in Rexdale:

"Umm to be more specific, there's people that (pause) ummm... plan to go somewhere. So there's people living in Rexdale because umm of financial situations with their family and in order to move on they have to be here to just basically build. There's people that are here basically don't have a care in the world. They're just going to stay here because they are comfortable."

Rebecca identified herself as being part of the first group. Rebecca stated "my mind state is being here to get out. Not being here just because I'm comfortable." The other participants did not share this belief of being in Rexdale to get out although Natalie does say she found as she has gotten older that she has to work and attend school out of Rexdale in order to achieve her goals.

Part of the participants' descriptions of Rexdale included what they like and dislike about living in the community. All the participants discussed how they like the recreation centres and facilities that are located in their neighbourhoods. The recreation centres and facilities included community centres, tennis courts, swimming pools, and libraries. Most of the participants discussed how they also liked the friendships they developed when they were younger and the

bonds they have formed with others in the community. The youth were still friends with these individuals.

Two of the participants expressed their dislike of the strong law enforcement presence in Rexdale. Eric noted that the police presence was stronger a couple years ago due to the violence that occurred, but currently he said the police presence is not as strong. Even though Eric said he disliked the presence, he understood why it was needed. Eric said the police presence has both good and bad aspects, “like you actually saw that the city was trying to do something, but it also caused some harassment among people who weren’t doing anything wrong.” While speaking with Irene about her dislike of the police presence in Rexdale, something interesting happened. While explaining her dislike of the police presence, both Irene and the author heard sirens rush by which interrupted Irene during her explanation. The sirens also caused Irene and the author to laugh at the irony of the situation. Specifically, Irene disliked the police presence in parks:

“I feel like, like they just hang out in the park sometimes. You can see like police roaming around like, like yeah. I feel like that, like in other places, like if you just hang out like in the park like it’s not as much like policing. But around here, like I’ve been to a couple of like, like parks and like I always see like police, so yeah.

Another aspect of the youth’s descriptions included what they wanted to stay the same in Rexdale and what they wanted to change. The participants wanted the resources and community centres to stay the same. Rebecca thought these resources just need to do more outreach activities so that individuals know they do exist in Rexdale. Natalie discussed how she liked the Humber Arboretum and the surrounding cycling and hiking trails and how she wanted those to stay the same. Although the participants gave some idea of what they wanted to stay the same, the participants appeared to have a better idea of what they would want to change in Rexdale.

Rebecca, Natalie, and Eric mentioned that they would like to see changes in the overall appearance and infrastructure in Rexdale. As previously mentioned, Rebecca described Rexdale

as having a 'pretty' and 'ugly side'. Rebecca suggested that more murals should be completed because she thinks they are something liked by people of all ages. Rebecca said: "So they just need nice murals, you know? There's a lot of kids growing up in the area and they seeing that stuff and older people like seeing it too. Make it look like Sesame Street! (*laughs*) Like yeah, you know? Just more attractive, more inviting."

Eric discussed how he would like to see the creation of a new attraction in Rexdale. He felt that surrounding areas had attractions but that Rexdale only had Woodbine Racetrack and Fantasy Fair, the small amusement park inside of Woodbine Centre. Eric wants people to be willing to make an investment in Rexdale, "Bring something different down here. Bring something nice. Bring something to liven it up."

The lack of attractions in Rexdale has lead people to go out of their community to participate in activities. Natalie discussed how as she got older, she found herself not spending as much time in Rexdale. Natalie said "I think that Rexdale, it's not underdeveloped, but I doesn't have a lot of the things that surrounding areas have. So I'd much rather spend time outside of it." Natalie also found that some of the infrastructure was out of date and need to be updated.

Natalie discussed how she would want to change where Humber College was located and move it out of her neighbourhood. She said that having the college located in her neighbourhood is difficult because there are a lot of students who live nearby who can be rowdy and disruptive. Natalie said she would also want to relocate some of the housing developments. She said that the housing developments took away from the land and required some of the trees to be demolished. The green space in her neighbourhood was something that was important to Natalie.

Youth's experiences of living in Rexdale

Defying stereotypes

During their descriptions of their experiences of living in Rexdale, all of the youth brought up experiences of how people reacted when they said they live in Rexdale. Many of these situations occurred during social interactions with classmates at post-secondary education institutions. Eric explained what would happen in this type of situation:

“So when I got to university and umm you know when you socialize with other students, Oh hey, where you from? How long is your commute? Whatever, whatever ... I'm like, uh, I, I was socializing and I'm like Oh, I'm from Rexdale and they're like Ohhhh Rexdale! (emphasis added) and I'm like, wait, what's wrong with Rexdale? And they're like, Oh you know, that's the ghetto and I was like What?! Are you kidding me?! I can show you like 3 places off the top of my head in the States that make Rexdale look like paradise.”

The other participants and the author have shared similar experiences. Rebecca discusses how when meeting people:

“It's like when I start talking about who I am, like if I meet somebody and they ask me who are you? And blah blah blah, then the last question is where you from? and I say Rexdale and they're like What?! (shocked) Are you serious? and it's like yes, intelligent people do live in Rexdale.”

This demonstrates how the youth feel they have to prove something and defy the negative stereotypes of living in Rexdale by saying they have moved on to post-secondary education.

Irene shared a similar experience. Irene stated: “Sometimes I say I live in Rexdale 'cause I feel like sometimes I try to like, kind of like show people Hey, people can be like in universities as well even though like people are from Rexdale.” The author has also had similar experiences.

This tied into the questions “Do you state that you live in Rexdale, Etobicoke or Toronto? and what are your reasons for that response”. These questions elicited some interesting responses from the participants. The initial response from Rebecca was “That's a really good question...(pause).” Rebecca thought it was a really good question because it made her realize

her response would be different depending on the situation and who she is speaking with. Rebecca said if it was more of a formal situation or related to employment she would state Etobicoke. If she was talking to someone from the community, friends or acquaintance she would say Rexdale. Those questions made the participants reflect on how they choose to describe where they live.

Eric's response was particularly interesting. Eric stated: "I guess I've been conditioned (*laughs*), since the first year of university to know to say Etobicoke 'cause I don't want people judging me." This means that Eric has learnt to or has been taught by others to not say Rexdale because of the images it conjures. Natalie said she gets annoyed and frustrated with the fact that she always has to justify her response if she says she lives in Rexdale: "When I say Rexdale people are always like oh my gosh, you're from the hood and I tend to not want to get into that...I don't want to have to explain that it's not what people think it is." It sounded like Natalie is tired of having to repeat the same story over and again.

As part of describing their experiences of living in Rexdale, Rebecca and Eric spoke about there being a choice of which path to take as a youth growing up in Rexdale. Eric described a story when he and his friend were hanging out and his friend pointed something out to him. Eric described his friend as saying:

"So you see that kid, he's probably going to be a doctor, right? And then on the other side of the street, you see that kid? He's probably gonna sell like, he's probably gonna end up selling TVs or anything or like nothing, he's not going to do something as great" ... and I thought wow...what, what side do I want to be on, right?"

While further asking Eric about these paths he noted, "Uh, looking at it like, like there's more than two paths, but those are like two extreme paths, and yeah, they do exist." This relates to how the youth described having to be careful with whom you surround yourself with. Eric

talked about being in middle school and high school and how you have to make a choice about who you hang out with:

“So, uh you gotta, you gotta choose your crowd carefully sometimes. ‘Cause even it’s a general thing, everyone knows, you end up, like show me, some people judge you around our friends, like, show me your friends, I can tell who you are and umm it’s easy to get caught up in the wrong crowd.”

Rebecca furthered this point by saying:

“Now if I grew up with a different type of mind state, say oh I really don’t care I’d probably have kids by now or I’d probably be smoking a joint right now or I’d probably be drinking. So it all just depends on who you really grew up with, who you want to surround yourself by.”

In terms of making the best choice and going down the right path, Rebecca spoke about the importance of having social support in terms of having a group of people that will help you succeed and do your best. Rebecca stated “I think if you surround yourself with a certain ‘class’, then it will allow yourself to bring success to yourself and you can move forward in life.”

Rebecca stressed this point multiple times during the interview.

Other aspects of describing their experiences of living in Rexdale are the challenges the youth experienced. Irene highlighted the challenge of finding employment in Rexdale stating: “I find it hard to find like a job here. I feel like there’s only like Woodbine or Walmart like around here and like other like grocery stores and stuff.” Irene further stated “I feel like I always go to other places because I feel like it’s hard to find jobs around here.” Irene would like to see more job opportunities available to youth in Rexdale.

Most participants agreed that there are resources available to youth, however, Irene pointed out a service gap for youth who live in Rexdale. Irene said she sees a service gaps in terms of services for LGBT youth. Irene also discussed that they felt that Rexdale was not accessible as other place in terms of getting medical services (e.g. in terms of finding a doctor). Natalie

discussed how she felt there were not many co-op opportunities available in Rexdale which can be a challenge for students who attend school in Rexdale.

Another challenge experienced by one of the participants was violence and conflict. Rebecca discussed how in high school she was bullied and how she was able to overcome and grow from those experiences by being surrounded by a supportive group of people. Eric discussed a particular difficult situation where his home was vandalized and how he actually ended up staying downtown a couple days a week so that he did not have to be around his home.

Portrayals of Rexdale

How Rexdale is portrayed

All participants agreed that Rexdale is not portrayed to others in the way that it actually is and that it is mainly portrayed in a negative light. Eric spoke about how people that live outside of Rexdale are ignorant and do not understand what it is actually like to live in Rexdale. Eric further said that people, “They’re ignorant to the fact that of what, of what it actually is. ‘Cause it’s not a ghetto, it’s not, it’s not a really bad place.” Eric hypothetically asked: “But what about all the good things that also happen here? What about the people who try to help out?” This shows that there are stories and experiences that need to be heard to challenge the dominant narratives about Rexdale.

Natalie said that Rexdale has been portrayed as the ‘hood’ and the home of a lot of gangs. Natalie went to further state some other images she finds to be associated with Rexdale, “you kind of see like the tough guys in their cars, and like blasting music.” Natalie also discussed how in her neighbourhood, there was a group of people she labelled as ‘scary people’ and how she says she feels she has to be cautious while walking to the bus stop. The author asked Natalie what she meant by the term ‘scary people’ and this was her response: “Scary people, kind of just

you – they’re these groups of guys walking around, like the typical thug.” It is important to note that Natalie while answering this question said that she did not want to stereotype or generalize, but it was how she felt.

Media portrayal of Rexdale

In general, all participants agreed that Rexdale has been portrayed in a negative light in the media. The participants spoke about how the media has portrayed Rexdale in a negative light due to the reports of crimes, gangs, and violence. One participant said that they do not regularly watch or keep up with the news so they felt they were not able to fully answer the question.

Both Rebecca and Natalie spoke about how in the media, Rexdale is usually encompassed as one whole community instead of thought about in terms of the different neighbourhoods.

Rebecca states:

“So I think that’s when it’s portrayed on the media, instead of them telling you the exact location where, they just put a borderline on it, a circle around it, saying it’s Rexdale. So people think that the whole entire area is bad, when it’s not because a crime can be committed on Thistletown Boulevard, a crime can be committed on Rodeo Drive, like don’t just classify it as Rexdale.”

Rebecca provided the author with an example of how the media would describe a crime that occurred in Rexdale:

“Let’s say on Thistletown Boulevard, which is where we are, automatically, they won’t say oh there was a crime that happened on Thistletown Boulevard, they would say that there was a crime in Rexdale. So automatically people would think Oh my God, it’s the project, it’s the project, but really and truly it’s not even really the project because when you look at Thistletown, back here, there’s all residential areas.”

Natalie provided a similar example, but also explains how a positive news stories would be portrayed:

“Well if there was like a break-in or a robbery or something like that, I think they tend to more say uh I think they, they tend to say Oh Rexdale, robbery in Rexdale! or something like that, whereas umm you know, they kind of count, encompass the town of Rexdale, like city of Rexdale or like the area. Whereas if I think it was umm the gardens or

something, they'd say oh like new flowers are planted here and they would tend to just say the Humber Arboretum or something like that.”

Natalie is making the argument that if it is a bad news story, the media will just simply state Rexdale, but when it is a positive news story, they will specifically state where the event has occurred. It appears the media thinks it is easier to just encompass Rexdale as a whole and portray the whole area as negative.

Rebecca brought up an example where media coverage unearths people's positive and negative feelings about youth who live in Rexdale. Specifically, the example was in terms of someone helping out a sports team at a local Rexdale high school. Rebecca said:

“But there's some people where their mind state is like why you gonna go help out these youth in THAT school... You shouldn't have did that... That's some people, and then some people are like well he helped my son or he helped whatever...”

This shows that there can be certain attitudes and thoughts about helping youth who live in certain neighbourhoods. Rebecca demonstrates how some people think the youth in these neighbourhoods do not deserve any help while other people are grateful that their child received assistance.

Natalie further explained another type of story about Rexdale that is present in the media which are stories about ways to improve Rexdale. While talking about what she sees in the media, Natalie said:

“They always talk about umm ways to 'improve' Rexdale which is nice, but they kind of like, a lot of the stories that I see, do like mention improving Rexdale, saying that there's something wrong with it... Like a lot of people are just like talking about ways to improve it, and you know, I think it's okay, I think it is.”

Natalie also discussed how the media tends to exaggerate stories about Rexdale and turn the stories into something they are not. She states: “I feel like umm a lot of the problems that occur

in Rexdale sometimes like the media blows them up and stuff so the problems that do sometimes happen aren't as major as they think they are.”

It is important to note the participants discussed how the media is not always negative in terms of discussing Rexdale. The participants discussed how the media will help promote various events that occur in Rexdale. Rebecca gave the example of the Fusion Festival which occurs during the summer at Albion Islington Square and is a multicultural festival showcasing food, fashion, dance and much more from South Asian communities, the West Indies and other countries. Rebecca said there is good media coverage of this event.

How Rexdale should be portrayed

The participants think Rexdale should be portrayed in a more positive light. Eric argued, “we have the same potential to do what any other neighbourhood has to do.” Eric said that Rexdale should be portrayed fairly without any biases or restraints. Natalie had similar feelings, but also acknowledges why people think of Rexdale in a certain way:

“I guess people do have a reason for, you know, thinking why Rexdale is the way that it is, but I think people should take into consideration like all the other facilities, and all the great stuff that is implemented in Rexdale.”

An alternative view that was represented was that Rexdale should be viewed as a place of opportunity and growth. Speaking in terms of Rexdale and other communities similar to Rexdale, Rebecca says:

“They need to look at these areas as lands of opportunities and just umm starting points for people. Not everybody is born into a million dollars, not everyone is born into a Richmond Hill house, but people can grow OUT of certain communities to end up with those things.”

This is an alternative view of Rexdale that the author has never considered before. The author has just simply thought of Rexdale as just another community in Toronto. This alternative view of Rexdale as a land of opportunity or starting point allows for a reconceptualization of Rexdale.

Sense of community

Connection to Rexdale

In terms of feeling connected to Rexdale and their neighborhood, Irene and Eric both expressed feelings of ‘being at home’ in Rexdale. Irene explained that she first lived downtown before moving to Rexdale and described the different environments. Irene stated in terms of comparing downtown Toronto and Rexdale “I just didn’t feel comfortable there (downtown) like, but here like I feel really comfortable here (Rexdale).” Irene further explained why she felt comfortable:

“Like I think there’s like, there’s a lot of like people of colour who live there and like there’s a lot of like people from the same caste, like who live here as well. Like so I don’t feel like, I feel like more like at home here so yeah.”

Eric expressed similar feelings about Rexdale feeling like home. Eric discussed how he can make friends anywhere and adapt to new surroundings, “but when I come back here, it feels like home.” Part of ‘feeling at home’ and being connected to their neighbourhood and to the Rexdale community is because of their friends. Most of the participants discussed how they felt at home and connected to the community because of their friends who also live in Rexdale.

Irene felt that part of their identity made them feel like they belong to the Rexdale community, while other aspects of their identity made them feel like they did not belong. Irene explains:

“Hmm...How I feel I belong...Uh I know like part of my identity like I guess like being a person of colour and like being an immigrant, that’s how I feel like connected, but I know other parts of me, like being queer like that’s like I don’t feel like in that sense, like I’m part of the Rexdale community. So yeah, but I feel like, I feel like being a youth as well, like I dunno why, but I feel like that, it helps me like be part of like the Rexdale community, so yeah.”

Some participants felt there was a stronger connection and a stronger sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and to the Rexdale community as a whole when they were younger as opposed to now. Natalie stated:

“ Umm I used to feel more, I used to be a little more connected. I used to volunteer at the hospital, but I kind of stopped that. Umm I used to go to school in Humberwood, but now I don't so there's not really that connection... And I don't really go shopping at Woodbine, so there's no connection there. I mean the only thing that's near my house is like I said, the Humber Arboretum so I guess that's the only thing that is keeping me connected to Rexdale 'cause a lot of like my jobs, my schooling, like it's outside of the area.”

Natalie further described their disconnection from Rexdale when she stated: “I don't really feel connected to the area all the much anymore. I feel like I've grown out of it. It was kind of like a nice place to grow up, but like, I don't feel too much of a connection there anymore.”

Irene also felt disconnected from the Rexdale community once she started to attend university downtown and became more focused on activities that occurred downtown.

Participants said another way they felt connected to their neighbourhood and to Rexdale was due to their involvement in the community. Rebecca and Eric both worked with youth in the community. Rebecca helps run a Girls Club and also teaches dance to children and youth. Eric helps facilitate youth programming and has also helped with park openings in the Rexdale area. Natalie and Irene both volunteered at the former schools they attended in Rexdale.

Significant spaces or places

Related to the idea of feeling connected to your community is what spaces or places in Rexdale are important to the participants. All of the youth highlighted certain spaces or places in Rexdale that were significant. Rebecca mentioned that the local mall (Albion Mall) was a place that was important to her because she liked to shop, but admitted that it was in need of a facelift. All participants mentioned that the schools they attended in Rexdale were important places to them. Eric specifically discussed a basketball court near one of his old schools that is called

‘The Cage’ because of the fencing that surrounds it and spoke about his memories of always playing basketball there with his friends and other youth.

Natalie, Irene and Eric all identified the Humber Trail that runs along the Humber River in Rexdale as an important space to them in Rexdale. These participants recalled various memories associated with the Humber Trail. The participants discussed riding their bikes or jogging along the trail. Eric also discussed a baseball diamond located in the Humberwood neighbourhood near the Humber Trail where he and his friends played baseball a couple of years ago.

Implications for Social Work: “Going that extra mile”

The youth brought forward a number of ideas of what social workers should know if they are going to work with youth in Rexdale. The suggestions include how social workers should act, certain aspects of living in Rexdale they should be aware of and what knowledge they should acquire. One idea specifically highlighted by Eric was “going that extra mile” which the author thinks accurately describes what a social worker should do when working with youth in Rexdale.

In terms of “going that extra mile”, Eric discussed a youth worker who worked at the local community centre which Eric and his friends attended. Eric stated: “when we were kids, we were a rowdy bunch, a rowdy bunch, and a lot of staff didn’t want to put up with us, but he always put up with us (*laughs*). To Eric, this showed that the youth worker was willing to work with the youth despite the fact they might not have been the easiest group to work with. Another example Eric gave about “going that extra mile” was how this youth worker would go to their supervisor and ask for permission and for extra time to take Eric and the other youth to various activities or events. Eric said this showed that the youth worker was willing to put in extra time and work to ensure the youth were able to experience various events and participate in different activities.

In terms of how the youth worker conducted himself, Eric stated “not only did he talk the talk, he also walked the walk.” Eric liked how this youth worker took the time to get to know the youth and actually talk to them. Eric spoke about how one day, out of the blue, the youth worker went out to the ice cream truck and bought ice cream for all the youth at the community centre. It was a seemingly simple gesture, but it made a large impact on Eric. It was not only the small gestures that made an impact, Eric mentioned that the bigger gestures the youth worker did showed that “hey, he has the power to do this, we could trust him.” Rebecca also discussed the importance of a social worker making connections with the youth, stating “start small, then go big.” Both Eric and Rebecca discussed how this would make youth start to trust a social worker.

Being honest with the youth is an important aspect of the relationship between the youth and the social worker which was highlighted by Eric. Eric discussed, “if you’re going to be engaging with the youth, be there for them”, but he also said that “You can’t promise them it’s going to be okay, you gotta, you gotta be honest”. To Eric, this meant that social workers would explain the various options that are available to the youth and try their best to support the youth in any way that they can. This also meant that social workers should be realistic.

Along with being honest, it is important for social workers to provide youth with the encouragement to succeed and to expose them to a world outside of Rexdale. Rebecca stated “there’s many youth that uh need help and just that little push in regards of how to be successful.” Eric said “one of the things you might want to point out is that the world isn’t like just this area, ‘cause that’s what I, that’s what I thought growing up here...“I actually thought the whole world was like this, this is what everything is like, but after you see the different aspects, you learn the ins and outs.” Eric said this did not occur until he went to university and realized

there was a world outside of Rexdale. Eric said a social worker needs to point out: “Hey, life isn’t, you’re just not bounded here or you don’t have to only do this, you can do this.” This means social workers need to help the youth discover their abilities and the options available to them.

It was also highlighted that social workers should be aware of the various resources that are available to youth in Rexdale because the youth may not know what is available to them. In regards to social workers helping the youth, Rebecca states:

“And there’s many (youth) that uh, just don’t have the knowledge for the resources or the motivation to get help or just to know about their surroundings, so having them help them out would be really good.”

Rebecca said another important factor in terms of social work practice with youth who live in Rexdale was having someone work with youth who is age appropriate:

“I hate seeing this, when you have like a 50 year old coming to you, to talk to you about success. That’s ridiculous. Bring somebody that age’s appropriate, that’s young, that knows the area... If you have people like me and you go to different schools and ‘cause they know us, right?... The youth will be connected more that way because they’re like Hey, oh my gosh, I grew up with them, of course I’m gonna do that... Yeah.”

This means that youth want to be able to relate to the people who come to speak to them at school or at a community program. If the person is not relatable to the youth, they will not be able to take away as much from the presentation. This is something people should keep in mind when booking speakers to speak at schools, events or community programs.

Social workers should also be aware of the different thoughts, feelings, and stereotypes that are associated with Rexdale. In terms of what social workers should know, Natalie states:

“Uh they should know the different uh like the different thoughts about Rexdale and different like, like the different thoughts that accompany the different areas in Rexdale. Like I know mine isn’t that quote on quote like bad (*does air quotations*), but they should kind of you know, umm be aware of if you’re working in Jamestown or something, kind of like you should be aware of possibly what’s in that area that can be motivating that child to do something, kind of like the reasoning.”

Irene highlighted the importance of social workers examining the social context. Irene discussed how a social worker working with youth in Rexdale should examine how race, education, immigrant status and other identities factor into a youth being labelled 'at-risk'. Irene stated "I feel like people should question like what does 'at-risk' like mean?" Rebecca discussed how social workers and other service providers need to be able to reflect on how their life experiences may differ from the youths' experiences. Rebecca stated "recognizing the difference where you grew up and where somebody else grew up and it helps you to understand the balance and it helps you to understand why people turn left, instead of right." Natalie further expands on this point by discussing how social workers should be aware of the living situations of kids that are living in Rexdale. Natalie states:

"A lot of children, in different parts of Rexdale's , I mean Rexdale, haven't been privileged to like grow up with the best living circumstances so I think social workers should really take that into consideration when they're helping kids."

If someone will be working with youth in Rexdale, they must be prepared to "go that extra mile" to ensure the youth receive the services they need. Someone has to be able to look beyond the stereotypes and see what is actually occurring in the lives of these youth. This person should also be aware of the resources available to youth in Rexdale. It is also important to be honest, encourage the youth to succeed and open their eyes to the world around them and new opportunities.

On a final note, there a few things the youth wanted to remind people about what it is like to live in Rexdale. Natalie noted that the general public should know that living in Rexdale is:

"A different experience for everyone. It's not this kind of big, scary city that everyone thinks it is, but at the same time, there are a lot of like social problems in it, but it's kind of like a subjective experience and I feel like it all depends on the person growing up umm there."

Almost all of the participants made the argument that Rexdale is not the only place that is negative. Irene discussed how “I feel like people shouldn’t just focus on like the negative. I feel like, like it happens to other places so it’s not just like that in Rexdale or like in other like priority like neighbourhoods so yeah.” Eric wanted to remind people to not be ignorant and he does not want people saying or thinking “Hey, oh you’re from this area, so that means you’re this.” It is the hope of the participants and author that these findings have made you reconsider your thoughts about Rexdale.

CHAPTER V: Analysis

A thematic and structural analysis of the findings was completed to examine what the youth said and how they described their experiences of living in Rexdale.

The youth discussed completing high school and moving onto post-secondary education. In particular, one youth discussed the importance of getting an education in order to be able to move forward with their life, including eventually leaving Rexdale. This finding reflects what the literature says about how youth can recognize the positive impacts of attending school and how it can lead to their future success (Smith et al., 2005). The youth also spoke about obtaining an education in order to defy the stereotypes associated with living in Rexdale. Youth shared similar stories in James' (2012b) book about overcoming the stigma associated with living in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. These findings relate to the theme of defying stereotypes.

Related to educational experiences are employment experiences. When the youth described not wanting to write down Rexdale when completing job applications, it demonstrates how 'post-code discrimination' plays a role in their life. Participants discussed writing Etobicoke or Toronto on a job application so the potential employer would not think they live in Rexdale. Participants hoped that the potential employer would only notice their postal code once they had been hired and that it would be too late for an employee to be terminated. This reflects similar findings discussed in the research completed by Macdonald & Marsh (2001). These findings demonstrate the identified needs of youth employment and economic opportunities which were discussed by Fogel (2004). This finding pertains to the theme related to positive/negative and good/bad binary.

The youth described various instances of violence. One participant discussed the how their house was vandalized. Another participant discussed how there was a police officer present at

their school to help deal with the conflict amongst the students. A different participant discussed having to make the choice when she was bullied to either fight back or to ignore it and move on. The various examples discussed by the participants are similar to instances of violence and conflict that youth discussed in studies completed by Morrill et al., (2000); Pryor et al., (1999) and Yonas et al., (2005). This is relevant to the theme about experiences of living in Rexdale.

One participant spoke about the impact of living in Rexdale had on their psychological health due to their house being vandalized and wondering why their house had been targeted. Another participant discussed how they were bullied in high school and how the bullying affected them. This reflects findings discussed by Brenner et al., (2013) in terms of how living in certain neighbourhoods can impact its resident's psychological or physiological health (Brenner et al., 2013). This finding connects to the theme about experiences of living in Rexdale.

Feelings of mistrust were discussed by one of the participants, who mentioned having to be cautious while walking to the bus stop due to the "scary people" that lived in the apartments in her neighbourhood. Ross et al. (2001) in their study discussed feelings of mistrust which were said to rise in neighborhoods that have high levels of crime, violence, and drugs (Ross et al., 2001). Connected to feelings of mistrust are feelings of hopelessness which can be associated with living in an underprivileged neighbourhood. The participants did not demonstrate feelings of hopelessness. Participants expressed positive feelings filled with hope and optimism. This contradicts what Bolland (2003) discussed in their research about how almost half of the male youth and a quarter of the female youth surveyed had medium or high levels of hopelessness (Bolland, 2003). These findings can be categorized in the themes of potential growth and experiences of living in Rexdale.

When one of the participants discussed they found it helpful to have friends who went through the same experiences and who attended the same recreational programs, they felt like there was always someone there for them and who understood what they were going through. Another participant also discussed the importance of friends and how being surrounded by the right people helped them to overcome certain challenges and help them succeed. This links to the literature about youth resilience. This reflects the findings of Bottrell (2009) who discussed the importance of friends and members of a youth network to help support youth in their everyday lives. These findings demonstrate that the youth are resilient and as Botrell (2009) notes, defies the negative stereotypes of youth being intimidating or troublemakers. In both the literature and the research findings, the themes of sense of community and community resources are present.

The participants showed varying levels of membership of belonging to their neighbourhood and community. Some felt more connected to Rexdale than others and it appears that the connection to Rexdale decreased as the youth got older. The youth who felt more connected to their community thought they had a role to play in their community due to their job and volunteer positions and could make changes through their work. Rexdale is significant for the participants because it is where they have lived for a majority of their lives. The participants may share a mutual history and similar experiences because they are members of the same community. These findings reflect three of the four elements of a sense of community (membership, influence, and shared emotional connection) as discussed by McMillan & Chavis (1986).

The youth felt their basic needs were not fully being met through their affiliation with the community. Almost all of the participants discussed having to go to attend post-secondary

education or work outside of Rexdale because the opportunities were not available in the community. Not having these opportunities available in Rexdale was a contributing factor to the youth feeling less connected to their community. This finding contradicts what is in the literature in terms of the reinforcement element of a sense of community. The reinforcement element is how someone's necessities could be met through affiliation with a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community was one of the identified needs of youth highlighted by Fogel (2004).

Place attachment was a phenomenon present in the interviews. All of the participants had lived in Rexdale for a number of years. The participants' feelings (both positive and negative) towards Rexdale and their experiences living in the community were discussed and explored. When the youth discussed how long they had lived in Rexdale and spoke about what were important places to them in Rexdale it reflected Tartaglia's (2006) description of place attachment. Many of the spaces the youth described as significant to them are social spaces. As previously discussed, social spaces are the spaces of our daily lives and what we experience each day (Sundstrom, 2003). The spaces determined to be important or significant were not defined as racialized spaces by the participants. The findings connected to place attachment relate to the theme of sense of community.

There is the idea that space appears to develop naturally and so do the people who populate these spaces (Razack, 2002). Interestingly, one of the participants brought forth their perception of the residential area as the nice area and the 'project' area with the apartments as the bad area. This participant also described how the south or residential side was the pretty side of Rexdale while the north or 'project' side of Rexdale was the ugly side. The participant made it seem like

these spaces had developed naturally into being ‘pretty’ or ‘ugly’ due to where they were located in Rexdale, their design and layout.

Two of the participants defined Rexdale as a ‘family-oriented’ place. Another participant spoke of viewing Rexdale as a place of opportunity or a stepping stone. These alternative views could potentially redefine how Rexdale is portrayed and described. This reflects the idea of space being viewed as a social product as described by Razack (2002). These findings are relevant to the themes of the portrayal of Rexdale, defying stereotypes and potential growth.

Aspects of the notions of race and space can be seen in the youths’ responses to the questions. For Irene, the notion of race and space played out in a positive light in terms of having members from the same caste in her community which allowed her to feel comfortable and at home in Rexdale. The participant later stated during the interview that being a person of colour also helped her feel connected to Rexdale. The participant used aspects of her racial and ethnic identity to help define her space in Rexdale.

However, other markers of her identity (e.g. identifying as queer) made her feel disconnected from Rexdale. This discussion demonstrates there are other markers of identity that can affect someone’s connection to and view of a space. This discussion also connects to the idea for someone to “know their place” spatially and socially as described by Sundstrom, 2003). The discussion displays the complexity of knowing your spatial and social location and how it is possible to know your geographic location, but how it may not seem to fit in with aspects of your social location.

When the youth described how Rexdale is usually portrayed as a ghetto or the ‘hood’ it connects to an idea presented by Kobayashi & Peake (2000) who discussed how dominant ideologies that emphasize difference in spaces contribute to the degradation of spaces or places

linked to racialized people (Kobayahsi & Peake, 2000). In this case, the dominant ideologies are in terms of the ghetto or the 'hood' and how those terms have been connected to racialized individuals. To think of Rexdale as the ghetto or the 'hood' can lead to the degradation of the spaces and places connected to its racialized residents. The theme of the portrayal of Rexdale is present in this finding.

When it was mentioned by one of the participants that they felt they had to be cautious while walking through their neighbourhood because of "scary people" there was a racialized connotation, even if the person did not mean to make one. When asked what the participant meant by "scary people" they answered "they're these groups of guys walking around, like the typical thug." The use of the word 'thug', insinuates a racialized individual due to who has been depicted as a thug in the media. The participant noted that they did not want to stereotype or generalize by using the word thug, but chose to use that phrase as it was how they felt. This connects to the idea of racialized spaces as described by Teelucksingh (2006). This has turned the areas where the "scary people" occupy like the street corner or the sidewalk into a racialized space. Those spaces are seemingly trivial, but as Teelucksingh (2006) notes spaces that subordinate racialized individuals are not blatantly obvious since these spaces are part of our everyday lives which makes it possible to normalize racism (Teelucksingh, 2006). This also places and assigns racialized individuals into different spaces which is an occurrence described by Kobayashi & Peake (2000).

It is important to not only focus on 'what' the participants said but also 'how' the participants spoke about their experiences and thoughts about Rexdale. During the interviews, the participants laughed while trying to explain their responses to a question. For example, when Eric discussed being conditioned to say Etobicoke instead of Rexdale, he laughed while saying

the response. This laughter could mean he cannot believe the fact it has gotten to the point of being conditioned to say Etobicoke instead of Rexdale. Another example is when the sirens could be heard during Irene's interview. Both Irene and the author laughed during this situation because it was ironic. Irene had been discussing how she disliked the police presence in Rexdale.

The participants' language was sometimes fragmented when speaking about their experiences. The participants would sometimes use words or phrases like "umm", "uh", or "like". This did not necessarily affect the presentation of their stories, but it showed how they considered what they wanted to say before they spoke or were trying to figure out how to answer a particular question. Sometimes, their speech was fragmented because the participants were not sure how to answer the questions and would want to ask for further clarification. The participants would ask what the author meant by certain terms or phrases or ask the author to repeat a question. The participants attempted to answer all questions and would further expand their answers when asked. In terms of body language, the participants had an open stance, they did not sit with their arms crossed or avoid eye contact. Sometimes participants would fidget by tapping their fingers on the desk or playing with a pen while answering the questions. Throughout the interviews, the participants appeared to be comfortable and engaged in small talk with the author.

CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

Areas for future research

There is minimal literature that focuses on Canadian neighbourhoods. As previously noted, much of the literature reviewed was about American neighbourhoods. This paper has helped contribute to the literature about Canadian youth who live in certain neighbourhoods and their lived experiences. Further studies of youth living in Rexdale with a larger sample size would allow for more stories and experiences to be heard. There are still many youth voices that have not been heard. This study is just the beginning. This study had more female participants, so there is less representation of the male youth voice. Future research could focus on gathering the stories and experiences of male youth. Future research could also focus on gathering both the female youth and male youth experiences of Rexdale and comparing them. Going forward, researchers may want to consider conducting focus groups with youth in Rexdale.

Of interest to the author is a) how the youth's connection to their neighbourhood and the Rexdale community has changed over time, b) how people define their place and space in Rexdale, c) why people feel they have to prove something by saying they live in Rexdale or have to justify why they live in Rexdale, and d) people's descriptions of Rexdale and how it should be portrayed.

Final thoughts

The findings presented some alternative views of Rexdale and helped paint a picture of what it is like for youth living in Rexdale. Both positive and negative aspects were discussed. The analysis discussed how some of the findings reflected and also contradicted what has been presented in the literature. One area of contradiction was the participants did not have feelings of hopelessness about living in a disadvantaged community, whereas in the literature this was

discussed. Another area of contradiction was in terms of the reinforcement element of someone's sense of community which is when identifying with one's community enables someone to obtain all that they need. The participants found that identifying with Rexdale sometimes did not help them acquire the supports they required. The implications for social work discussed how if someone is going to work with youth in Rexdale, they must be willing to "go that extra mile".

It was interesting to see how the participants and the author shared similar, yet different experiences of living in Rexdale. The researcher was exposed to experiences and ideas she had not previously heard before. The description of Rexdale as having a 'pretty'/light side and an 'ugly'/dark side really challenged what the author had thought about Rexdale. The author realized that she lives in the area that Rebecca deemed the 'pretty' side. The author never thought of there being a 'pretty'/light side or an 'ugly'/dark side in Rexdale or at least not in terms of the types of residence. The participants' stories and experiences have made the author think differently and reflect about her experience of living in Rexdale. The experiences show an honest portrayal of Rexdale that discusses both the positive and negative experiences.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore and collect the counter-narratives of the youths' experiences of living in Rexdale. This outcome was achieved. The aim of the research was to offer alternative narratives about Rexdale that challenge what has been presented thus far in the media about Rexdale. Alternative narratives and the reframing of Rexdale were discussed by the youth in terms of viewing Rexdale as a land of opportunity and viewing it as any other community.

This major research paper is important and relevant because even during the writing of this paper, the author was judged when she stated that she lived in North Etobicoke when speaking to

someone she came into contact with at her field placement. The person made a comment along the lines of “Oh, that isn’t a good area.” The author did not even have to say Rexdale, just saying North Etobicoke made the person who said the comment form an image in their mind. Even when the author spoke with her neighbours, they shared stories of how they heard people say Rexdale is the ‘hood’ or that people were surprised that Rexdale had residential areas with homes. This shows that this research is needed to challenge people’s thoughts and preconceived notions of Rexdale.

In essence, for these youth, their experiences of Rexdale were what they made of it. There were some negative experiences, but overall the youth described having a positive experience of living in Rexdale. These youth were judged for saying where they lived and the negative stereotypes associated with Rexdale. The youth demonstrated there is more to Rexdale than these negative stereotypes through the stories of their experiences. It is time for people to stop thinking about what they have previously heard about Rexdale and take it for what it actually is, just an average community in a large, urban metropolis.

APPENDIX A



Participants needed for a research study entitled
“Our stories, Our voices: Living in Rexdale”

Participants must be:

- Male or Female
- Living in Rexdale
- Between the ages of 15 to 24



You will be interviewed individually and will be asked to share your stories about living in Rexdale.

The interview will be approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes in length with an optional 30 minute follow up session to review interview transcripts.

Snacks and TTC tokens provided.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Erin Ciupa
MSW Candidate
School of Social Work
Ryerson University
Email: eciupa@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance by the Ryerson Research Ethics Board.

Erin Ciupa
Email: eciupa@ryerson.ca

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

“Our stories, Our voices: Living in Rexdale”

Erin Ciupa: MSW Candidate

School of Social Work – Ryerson University

A semi-structured interview guide will be used for this study. The aim is to uncover the counter-narratives of the youth, in other words, discover stories that challenge what is currently presented.

How old are you?

How long have you lived in Rexdale?

Which neighbourhood of Rexdale do you live in?

Experiences of living in Rexdale

- How would you describe Rexdale?
- Explain your experiences of living in Rexdale (Would they be positive or negative?)
- What do you like or dislike about living in Rexdale?
- Have you experienced any challenges while living in Rexdale? (For example, this could be in terms of education, finances, conflict, etc.)

What are the images associated with living in Rexdale?

- How do you think Rexdale is portrayed?
- How do you think Rexdale should be portrayed?
- Do you believe that the portrayals of Rexdale in the media are accurate? Why or why not?
- Do you state you live in Rexdale, Etobicoke or Toronto? What are your reasons for that response?
- What would you like to change in Rexdale? What would you like to stay the same?

Do you feel a connection to your neighbourhood and to the Rexdale community?

- Have you been involved in neighbourhood activities? If so, in what ways have you been involved?
- How do you feel you belong in (to) the Rexdale community?
- What places or spaces are important to you in Rexdale?

What is important to know about living in Rexdale?:

- What should social workers and other service providers know about youth living in Rexdale?
- What do you want other people (the general public) to know about living in Rexdale?

Ending questions:

- Is there anything missing from the story about your experiences of living in Rexdale?
- Is there anything else you wish to tell me about living in Rexdale that has not been discussed during the interview?

APPENDIX C



Consent Agreement

Our stories, Our voices: Living in Rexdale

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Please read the following information and ask any questions before you agree to participate so you fully understand what you will be asked to complete as a research participant.

Investigator:

This research study is being conducted by Erin Ciupa under the supervision of Dr. Henry Parada from the School of Social Work at Ryerson University. The results will contribute to my Major Research Paper (MRP).

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore youth's experiences and stories of living in Rexdale.

Description of the study:

You will be asked to complete an interview which will be audio-recorded. The research will take place in a room at a community centre or library. The date and time will be determined at a later date. You will be asked open-ended questions which allow you to explain your answers. The statistical data that will be collected is age and gender. The expected length of the interview will be 45 to 60 minutes. You will also be asked to attend an optional follow up session to review the data collected. The follow up session should be approximately 30 minutes in length. The data collected will be made available to participants during the follow up sessions in order to review the data, see if it is accurate and to ask for clarification.

Potential risks or discomforts:

This is a low risk study. The nature of the questions may bring up uncomfortable feelings from past experiences. You may choose to not answer any questions you wish and may withdraw from the study at any time. We can also take breaks from the interview if you wish. A list of counselling agencies is being provided to each participant and you may contact the counselling agencies after the interview if you feel the need.

Potential benefits of the study:

I cannot guarantee that you will receive any immediate benefits from participating in this study, however this research will help social workers when they work with youth in a variety of settings. The research will allow for youths' voices to be heard and allow for you to share your stories and experiences.

Costs/Compensation:

You will not be paid to participate in this study, however, snacks and TTC tokens will be provided.

Confidentiality:

Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to identify the names of the participants. Information and data that is on a computer or USB will be password protected and encrypted. All data collected will be stored for a period of up to two years and will then be destroyed. The audio recordings and the signed consent forms will be locked in a secure space that only I will have access to. The audio recordings will be deleted approximately six months after the submission of the Major Research Paper (MRP). The information cannot be released unless you say something that the researcher has the duty to report. The researcher has the duty to report under these circumstances: if it is believed you may harm yourself or someone else, if you speak of child abuse or neglect or if you state you have or are going to commit a crime. You have the right to review/edit the recordings or transcripts during the follow up sessions.

Voluntary participation and withdrawal from the study:

Participation in this study is voluntary meaning you can choose whether to be in this study or not. You may withdraw at any time without any consequences. If you choose to withdraw from this study you may also choose to withdraw your data from the study. You may also choose not to answer any question(s) and still remain in the study. Your choice of whether to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University.

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have any questions later about the research, you may contact:

Principal Investigator
Erin Ciupa
Masters Candidate
School of Social Work
Ryerson University
eciupa@ryerson.ca

Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Henry Parada
Graduate Program Director and Associate Director
School of Social Work
Ryerson University
416-979-5000 ext. 6223 or hparada@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact:

Toni Fletcher, Research Ethics Coordinator
Research Ethics Board
Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, Ontario
M5B 2K3
416-979-5042
toni.fletcher@ryerson.ca

Agreement:

Your signature means you have read the information in this form and have had a chance to ask any questions about the study “*Our voices, Our stories: Living in Rexdale*”. Your signature also means that you agree to be audio-recorded. You will be given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Agreement to be audio-recorded

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

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