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Black Youth Mental Health: Reconstructing Identity Through Art-Based Research

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Abstract. This article presents data from a creative art-based activity conducted as part of an ongoing youth-centered phenomenological study with Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth (ACCY) aged 16-18 in Canada. The youth in this study were asked to create identity maps to explore what it means to be Black and Canadian and how their identity affects their mental health and well-being at home, school, and in Canadian society. The art-based activity of this study was informed by Fine and Sirin's (2007) concept of the hyphenated selves defined as "the social and developmental psychologies of youths living in bodies infused with global and local conflict, as they strive to make meaning, speak back, incorporate and resist the contradictory messages that swirl through them" (p. 17). It is well-established in the literature that Black youth are grossly underrepresented in research within the Canadian context, meaning that their perspectives are often missing. Therefore, it is significant to gain their perspectives on issues that impact their overall mental health and well-being. The art-based activity empowered ACCY to become knowledge producers, allowing them to construct their own narratives about their identity and how it shapes their mental health experience. A theoretical analysis of the identity maps produced by ACCY using post-colonial theory, critical race theory (CRT) and the concept of anti-Black racism (ABR) reveals that being Black and Canadian are two separate and distinct identities Black youth embody with varied outcomes on their mental health and well-being. This article emphasizes the importance of using art-based research with Black youth as a decolonizing approach to gain their perspectives on race and mental health in order to better understand and respond to their mental health needs.

Keywords: Art Based, Youth Centred, Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth (ACCY), Black, Anti-Black Racism.

Introduction

This article presents the results from a creative art-based activity conducted as part of an ongoing youth-centred phenomenological study with Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth (ACCY) residing in Southern Ontario urban areas, drawn from a dissertation project. The primary research question for the dissertation project asks: *What are the mental health experiences of ACCY and how do these experiences shape their utilization of mental health services?* ACCY are defined as youth between the ages of 16–18, born in Canada to Afro-Caribbean parents. The participants were living at home, attending secondary school, and accessing mental health services as well as spiritual and religious support. Participants for the study were recruited with the help of key contacts and flyers. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities. As part of the study, the participants were asked to create identity maps reflecting on what it means to be Black and Canadian and how their identity affects their mental health and well-being at home, school, and in Canadian society. Six ACCY consisting of three males and three females, from the following ethnic backgrounds: Jamaican, Grenadian, Trinidadian and Vincentian, completed the optional art-based activity, which averaged 30 minutes in duration.

The art-based activity utilized Fine and Sirin's (2007) concept of the hyphenated selves defined as "the social and developmental psychologies of youths living in bodies infused with global and local conflict, as they strive to make meaning, speak back, incorporate and resist the contradictory messages that swirl through them" (p. 17). In addition to Sirin and Fine's (2007) work, the identity maps created by the youth were analyzed through the lenses of post-colonial theory, critical race theory (CRT), and the concept of anti-Black racism (ABR). The identity maps were further analyzed using Josselson's conceptions of the hermeneutics of restoration and demystification. Josselson's (2004) hermeneutics of restoration aims "to re-present, explore and/or understand the subjective world of the participants and/or the social and historical world they feel themselves to be living in" (p. 5). This perspective views people as experts of their own experiences and as knowledge producers (Josselson, 2004). On the other hand, the hermeneutics of demystification does not view people's experience as "transparent to itself: surface appearances mask deep realities, a story told conceals an untold one. What is taken for granted in a hermeneutics of restoration is problematized from this vantage point" (Josselson, 2004, p. 13). Josselson's (2004) concepts of hermeneutics of restoration and demystification enable researchers to develop their coding system to decode any hidden messages and to ground their analyses using theories. For example, in this research, codes were created using the hermeneutics of restoration to analyze the language ACCY used to describe their experiences and their environments. The coding system also used the

participants' own spoken words as code, which helped to ground their experiences and capture their perspectives.

Black Youth and Research

The literature indicates that the mental health concerns of Black youth are a growing concern, particularly in the light of their experiences of systemic ABR (Charity Village, 2021; Salami et al., 2022). Additionally, they face anti-Black sanism, a form of oppression that further marginalizes Black individuals with mental illness (Meerai et al., 2016). These scholars have observed that Black children are disproportionately psychiatrized (Meerai et al., 2016). In terms of systemic ABR, Black youth encounter disparities within dominant institutions such as the criminal justice system, as they are more likely to come into contact with the police through acts of racial profiling that assumes criminality even when there is none (Washington, et al., 2021). Furthermore, within the mental health system, Black youth face barriers accessing services that are racially and culturally affirming (Fante-Coleman et al., 2022; Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; Salami, et al., 2022). All of these experiences described above fall under the aegis of systemic institutionalized ABR. They speak to the ubiquity of the coloniality of racism that exists and persists within key institutions, and its continuous manifestation in the lives of Black children and youth, shaping and influencing their identities, mental health and well-being in Canadian society.

Racial discrimination is reported to have significant deleterious effects on the psychological well-being of Black youth (Assari et al., 2017) and increases the risk for suicidality in Black males compared to their female counterparts (Assari et al., 2017). It also adversely affects the development of positive self-esteem (Cénat et al., 2023), as attributes such as criminality and dangerousness are projected on Black males (Anucha et al., 2017), while Black females are negatively stereotyped as angry (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018). In the school environment, McPherson (2022) highlights that Black youth's sense of belonging and safety is compromised when they experience racial stereotyping and microaggressions, along with a lack of support from the education system to help them cope with these challenges. In an effort to fully capture the experiences of Black youth and gain their perspectives on issues that impact their overall mental health and well-being, it is essential to address their marginalization in research (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; Salami et al., 2022). This can be achieved by directly including Black youth in research and utilizing methodologies that provide a decolonizing lens, allowing them to share their stories and counternarratives.

Research is an approach to gaining access to knowledge and providing people with the opportunity to share their experiences and worldviews. However, this privilege is dominated by colonial frameworks that have historically been disadvantageous to colonized people, including Black (Césaire, 1972) and Indigenous communities (Lenette, 2022).

Colonial epistemology and ontology have 'othered' Black people misrepresenting them through negative stereotypes based on cultures, ways of being, and who they are as human beings (Fanon, 1952/1967). The theoretical foundations of colonial knowledge reinforce the hegemonic status of Whiteness as the universal standard by which others are judged including Black people. Dominant research methodologies are largely influenced by Eurocentric frameworks that fail to acknowledge other systems of knowing, such as those from Indigenous and African cultures (Lenette, 2022). In contrast, Indigenous and African epistemological and ontological perspectives are better equipped to represent, contextualize and define their people, cultures, values and belief systems, as Eurocentrism tends to devalue the inherent worth and dignity of Black and Indigenous Peoples (Lenette, 2022).

Researchers often fail to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and racial contexts that shape people's lives, which can be harmful and further perpetuate Western epistemology and ontology in research methodologies. These methodologies have a history of misrepresenting, distorting and delegitimizing the knowledge and realities of Black people. Thus, it is imperative for research on and with Black youth to recognize them as legitimate knowers whose lived realities can generate significant knowledge that is better suited to respond appropriately to their particular mental health needs. Hence, research methodologies, including art-based research and phenomenology, can be suitable and highly fruitful for developing a Black youth perspective in a multiplicity of areas, including mental health. For this reason, several Black scholars, including this author, Dr Hellen Gateri and Donna Richards, have a keen interest in decolonizing research and Eurocentric knowledge production by conducting research that centers the voices of Black communities, including Black youth. Incorporating more Black scholarship in our work and using theories that can contextualize the lived experiences of Black people is a crucial step toward decolonizing research and challenging Eurocentric frameworks. A decolonizing approach is necessary to deconstruct stereotypical views and to resist colonial narratives of Black youth and their mental health experiences. It is equally important to consider CRT to understand race as a social construct and to capture the narratives and counternarratives of individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) as they experience various phenomena. CRT is also imperative for analyzing how Black youth in general are treated in society and within dominant institutions. To further theorize the experiences of Black youth, ABR as a concept helps to illuminate the unique experiences and challenges they face in society. This article emphasizes the importance of employing art-based research with ACCY facing mental health challenges. Art-based research is a creative decolonizing approach that allows researchers to gain insight into ACCY's perspectives on race and identity formation. It also acts as a means to decolonize knowledge by revealing how these youth deconstruct and reconstruct their identities and engage in acts of resistance in colonial contexts.

Art-Based Research

Art-based research is understood as an emancipatory decolonizing approach that provides a culturally safe space for Black and racialized people to share their experiential knowledge creatively through methods like drawings and photovoice (Lenette, 2019, 2022). This method is particularly important for offering counternarratives that can interrogate Eurocentric systems of knowledge and traditional research approaches (Lenette, 2019, 2022). By focusing on cultural safety, this decolonizing approach, can deter the stereotyping of identities, cultures and worldviews of Black people. Researchers utilizing culturally safe research approaches when working with Black youth can ultimately help mitigate the inherent power dynamic that exists between the researchers and participants. This can create a safe space where Black youth feel respected and can freely express their feelings and emotions. As Lennette (2022) points out, art-based method promotes a more collaborative and ethical process that values the perspectives of the participants and co-researchers, thereby protecting participants' rights from being violated. Furthermore, art-based research is also credited with building stronger engagement between researchers and participants (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016). This engagement can empower participants throughout the research process (Nathan et al., 2022). Art-based research can be a useful strategy to involve Black youth living with mental health challenges in research to understand their perspectives. Another key element of art-based research is that it is viewed as a method of inquiry that breaks away from a positivist lens and "is 'fueled' by an act of rebelling against structured, rigid, 'objective,' deductive and nomothetic measurements of people's feelings, behaviours, values, and beliefs" (Colucci, 2013, p. 41). In a scoping review conducted by Nathan and colleagues (2022), they found that "ABM [arts-based methodologies] was reported as adding substantial utility to more traditional qualitative research approaches including promoting meaningful exploration of participant experience" (p. 803). Pinto-Garcia et al., (2022) capture the essence of art-based research and assert:

> Arts and other creative practices enable people to identify, express and manage emotions; increase self-confidence and recognize their own personal tools to deal with difficult situations and take advantage of opportunities in life; heal trauma and deal with identity issues in non-verbal ways; explore alternative meanings to experiences through metaphors and symbols; and strengthen skills for self-regulation, empathy, trust, conflict transformation, teamwork and nonviolent communication in the interpersonal dimension. (p. 1530)

Through expressive and creative means, art-based research offers Black youth with an opportunity for self-expression and provides

researchers with the tools to step outside of traditional research paradigms. Reilly (2022) postulates that art-based research "offers opportunities to stretch capacities for knowing, creating a synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze, and represent data" (p. 72). Over the years, this form of research has been applied in qualitative research across multiple disciplines such as education and psychology (Wang et al., 2017). There are several participatory art-based methods including drawing (Fine & Sirin, 2007) and photovoice (Chinn & Balota, 2023). Art-based interventions have been utilized with diverse groups including refugees (Lenette, 2019, 2022), individuals who have experienced violence (Pinto-Garcia et al., 2022), those struggling with depression (Lee & Choi, 2023), and at-risk youth (Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2011). Although researchers recognize art as a valuable research method that can offer new perspectives and enable participants to reflect on their experiences, Colucci (2013) asserts that art-based activities in research are not widely accepted. Concerns have been raised regarding the interpretation of art-based data produced by participants since there is no standardized approach to assessing such art (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016). Despite this methodological issue, the utilization of art-based research continues to grow.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilized post-colonial theory, CRT and the concept of ABR to analyze the continuous impacts of colonialism on the lives of Black people (Césaire, 1950/1972). Post-colonial theory provides the theoretical foundation to examine the construction of colonial knowledge and cultural imperialism (Césaire, 1950/1972; Said, 1978). This framework is central for understanding the applicability of CRT and the concept of ABR, as it relates to the identity and experiences of Black people within institutions and society at large. The relevance of post-colonial theory in this study rests in its theoretical framing to highlight the insidious effects of colonialism (Césaire, 1950/1972), and the making of the racialized 'other' (Said, 1978), whose systems of knowledge, culture, and ways of being have been relegated to an inferior position. For example, the dehumanization of Black people, their identity, and culture was premised on the Eurocentric pseudoscientific characterization of Blackness as racially inferior compared to White people (Césaire, 1950/1972). The effects of which are still felt today. Historically, colonizers imposed negative stereotypes on Black people, which continue to affect their consciousness as they are continually discriminated against (Fanon, 1952/1967). This distorted representation of Black people makes them question their identity in cultures, such as White culture, that fail to recognize their inherent worth (Du Bois,1903; Fanon, 1952/1967). Regarding ACCY participants' identity maps, using post-colonial theory provides the analytical lens to deconstruct colonial taken-for-granted knowledge that has historically racialized and otherized non-Whites. Simultaneously, it empowers Black youth with mental health

challenges to partake in reconstructing knowledge that authentically represents their experiences, histories and worldviews.

CRT's conceptualization of race as a social construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) provides the analytical tools to contextualize how race is operationalized in the policies and practices of dominant institutions. This theoretical framework allows for an analysis of how power and privileges are afforded based on race, which determines racial groups' access to material benefits (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) including Black youth's access to mental health services. One of CRT's key tenet is counternarratives (Ladson-Billings, 2013), which creates space for ACCY to share their experiences as Black youth, amplify their voices and recognize them as legitimate knowledge holders and producers. While CRT focuses broadly on the experiences of racialized people, ABR as a concept centres the experiences of the Black communities in society and within dominant institutions. Scholars have recognized ABR to be systemic, which refers to the ways in which ABR has become systematically embedded into various institutions by way of reduced expectations, negative stereotypes and invisibility of Black humanity (Anucha et al., 2017). Analyzing ABR helps to illuminate and question Black people's continuous experiences with systemic racism. Moreover, ABR is also geared towards developing interventions that can transform institutional policies and practices to achieve race equity.

Main Argument and Discussion of Art-Based Activity

An analysis of the identity maps revealed that ACCY participants struggle with their Canadian identity, which they associate with Whiteness. Although the ACCY were born in Canada, they expressed the belief that to be Canadian means to be White, to have easy access to opportunities and be treated with respect. The youth also indicated that being Canadian entails having a sense of belonging and living in an inclusive society. Due to how race is treated within the Canadian context, the ACCY do not feel safe in colonial spaces and feel undervalued. These youth, who are facing mental health challenges are cognizant that society does not treat people equally based on perceived biological characteristics. ACCY are aware that they are more likely to be negatively stereotyped and discriminated against compared to their White counterparts. For example, a 17-year-old male and a 16-year-old female ACCY participant reported experiencing aggressive treatment during their encounter with the police, which adversely affected their mental health, resulting in the presentation of symptoms closely related to racial trauma. This aggressive treatment made them question their worth as human beings. In reality, the ACCY struggle with their Canadian identity as this identity does not protect them from systemic ABR. Consequently, they are exposed to conditions that negatively impact their mental health and overall well-being in society.

From the perspectives of the ACCY, to be Black is to experience systemic ABR that results in the invalidation of their racial identity in

society and within dominant institutions including school, the criminal justice system, and the mental health system where their behaviours are disciplined rather than contextualized. These youth also experience colourism at both the individual and systemic levels. For female ACCY with dark pigmentation, colourism impacts their self-esteem. A 16-year-old female ACCY wanted a lighter skin tone at a younger age due to Westernized standards of beauty, which further negatively affected her mental health due to how society treats skin colour. The ACCY reported that people with lighter pigmentation are treated better than those with darker skin. However, an 18-year-old female ACCY with a lighter skin tone reported that her mental health struggles were not taken seriously by a White mental health provider while accessing psychiatric mental health services. This encounter left her feeling invalidated and disrespected. Due to experiences of invalidation, ACCY reported that they feel more comfortable and validated utilizing racially and culturally affirming mental health services.

Scholars have critiqued the European standard of beauty as the norm due to its insidious effects on Black lives (Crutchfield, 2020; Dupree-Wilson, 2021; Hunter, 2005, 2007). In the case of male ACCY, colourism results in them being a target of racial discrimination in the form of overpolicing. ACCY's experiences of racial discrimination and prejudice are known to impede Black adolescents from forming a strong racial identity as they navigate the dominant culture as well as their own (Jernigan and Daniel, 2011; Sellers et al., 2006). Erikson (1968) stated that the exploration and development of a self-identity is a primary goal for adolescents. A fundamental task for racialized youth is the development of an ethnic/racial identity during the adolescent phase (Hoffman et al., 2019; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). These social identities are considered to be central to non-White youth in societies that are divided by race (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), as it helps them to embrace their identity and feel a sense of connectedness and belonging that can further enhance their overall mental health and well-being.

Utilizing Sellers and colleagues' (1998) dimensions of racial identity can help us understand the correlation between racial identity and self-concepts among ACCY. These dimensions are racial salience, racial centrality, racial regard and racial ideology. Racial salience is connected to a person's concept of self that can be impacted by a particular situation or period of time. Adolescents in general are faced with a higher level of consciousness of self and their environment during the adolescence phase (Neblett et al., 2009). They start to engage in more reflective thinking and reasoning and undergo social, physical and psychological changes (Cooper et al., 2008). Hence, context plays a significant role in racial salience as Black people's lives are influenced by wider systemic issues throughout their life course. As reported by the ACCY participants, systemic ABR occurring in setting like the criminal justice system plays a key role in

shaping their everyday experiences in society, which ultimately impacts how they see themselves and are treated.

Racial centrality underscores a person's racial membership as a central part of how they identify and assess the impact their racial identity has on their self-concept. The ACCY who participated in the art-based activity preferred to be identified by their race and ethnicity as it allows them to feel a sense of connectedness and validation to their Black identity. Moreover, racial centrality is considered to be the most stable dimension of racial identity (Sellers et al., 1998). Hoffman et al. (2019) view racial centrality as an asset for Black youth in developing strong peer support, and research has suggested that a strong racial identity results in positive psychological well-being in Black youth (Mandara et al., 2009). As demonstrated by the ACCY participants, they are not afraid of being Black but rather, they are concerned about the discrimination against Black people in Western cultures that limits their freedom as Black youth and can trigger poor mental health outcomes.

In respect to racial regard, it is the feeling a person has about their racial identity, which is further broken down into public and private regard, meaning, the Black person's perceptions about race that other people may apply to them and their own perceptions of their race, respectively (Sellers et al., 2006). ACCY are aware that Black people are stereotyped and discriminated against on the basis of race and are inferiorized due to hegemony of Whiteness. In spite of the stigmatization of Blackness, ACCY are resisting negative connotations of Blackness and want others to view them in positive ways. According to Sellers and colleagues (2006), positive attitudes toward African American adolescents result in higher psychological functioning, whereas racial discrimination contributes to poor psychological functioning (Sellers et al., 2006). Racial centrality, racial salience, and racial regard play key roles in understanding the perceptions and attitudes ACCY have of being Black. Conversely, racial ideology speaks to ideas a person may have about how their racial group should behave (Sellers et al., 1998). Due to racism in public spaces, ACCY adopt safety behaviours and are hypervigilant to avoid unwanted negative attention that can result in their bodies being criminalized as a result of being Black.

Despite, the ACCY participants' struggles with systemic ABR, the identity maps revealed that they are embracing being Black rather than conforming to a "double consciousness" (Du Bois,1903) of who they are. The female ACCY are at a stage in their lives where they are appreciating their skin colour and would rather be themselves. ACCY highlighted that Blackness is about the affirmation of racial pride and being resilient in a society where to be Black is met with ongoing racism. They are resisting and decolonizing colonial constructs of Blackness through their construction of positive messages of what being Black entails. They are inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and race socialization messages.

The literature on positive youth development emphasizes the importance of providing youth with opportunities to build and strengthen positive attributes to aid in their development and growth (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Racial–ethnic socialization is one of the strategies utilized by parents and Black adults to communicate positive messages about race and ethnicity to children and youth, thus serving as a protective factor to help decolonize racist ideologies, beliefs and norms pertaining to Black people (Harris-Britt et al., 2007; Jernigan, 2009; Neblett et al., 2009). Positive results have been reported from the use of racial–ethnic socialization messages as they help Black youth build pride and respect for their race (Brown et al., 2020; Harris-Britt et al., 2007). This socialization method also prepares Black children and youth to cope with ongoing racism and to build resilience (Brown et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2012; Neblett et al., 2009; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). Overall, racial–ethnic socialization is considered a protective factor that acts as a buffer against poor mental health and well-being (Brown et al., 2020). Children and youth who endorse a positive identity have higher self-esteem (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Joseph and Hunter, 2011) and report fewer depressive symptoms (David & Stevenson, 2006).

Implications and Conclusion

Art-based research proved to be beneficial for both the researcher and the participants in this study. It allowed the researcher to explore and gain an in-depth understanding (Wang et al., 2017), of the experiences of ACCY. To add, it enabled the youth participants to engage in storytelling and construct their perspectives of what it means to be Black and Canadian, while at the same time decolonializing and challenging stereotypes projected onto Black people. Coholic and colleagues (2020) identify art-based research as a means of maintaining youth engagement, as "marginalized youths can become easily frustrated and disengaged" (p. 273). Moreover, the art-based activity provided a conducive and safe space for ACCY to self-express and be heard. It captured ACCY's voices, emotions, cognitions and the meaning of their experiences in society. Ultimately, this approach positioned ACCY as knowledge producers, and they used the opportunity to construct their own narratives about their identity. Thus, art-based research with Black youth served as a conduit to reducing their marginality in research and amplifying their voices on issues that impact their everyday lives. It also empowered ACCY to speak back in creative ways. The art-based activity demonstrated that ACCY have a lot to share and, when given the opportunity, they become very engaged in research. Knowledge and understanding of their lived experiences can help facilitate improvement in ACCY's mental health. This is needed at a time when the mental health of Black youth and the Black communities are in a state of crisis. Researchers are encouraged to employ art-based research with Black youth in order to provide them with a platform that supports storytelling and meaning-making that validates their experiences.

Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Author Contribution Statements

The author confirms sole responsibility for the inception, writing, analysis and revising of the manuscript.

Ethics Approval

The dissertation project has been ethically approved by the York University Ethics Review Board.

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