



Gender Group at Peak House:

Making space beyond inclusion, resisting cis and heteronormativity

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Abstract

Gender Group is an ever-evolving therapeutic group at Peak House. Peak House is a live-in program for 13 to 18-year-olds of all genders who are struggling with problematic substance use, exploitation and oppression in their lives. This article explores Gender Group's historical and current attempts to make space while resisting sexualised and gendered violence, cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Particular ethics structure the practice of Gender Group. These include: contextualising problems, enacting accountability, attending to language, resisting the binary while acknowledging the impact of the binary and recognising youth as changemakers in communities. The authors examine how practitioners co-construct safety with youth by holding structure and fluidity/flexibility in tension, and through the therapists decentring themselves and demasking professionalism. All of these practices create space for outcomes that cannot be measured, such as the therapeutic value for young people's lives, the reduction of harm, the amplification of youth wisdom, solidarity through lateral mentoring and the transformation of communities by young people.

I think Gender Group was the most healing group for me ... I was comfortable to talk about things that had a really big impact on me and that had a lot to do with my drug use.

(Jade)



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Peak House is a live-in program for 13 to 18-year-olds of all genders who are struggling with problematic substance use, exploitation and oppression in their lives. For over 30 years, Peak House has strived to create a welcoming and inclusive space for youth of all genders, cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations. The innovation and evolution of therapeutic practices at Peak House are a result of youth wisdom (Reynolds, 2002), knowledge and expertise. The therapeutic practices at Peak House are also informed by narrative therapy (Denborough, 2008; Denborough, 2014; M. White, 2006; M. White & Epston, 1990) and collaborative therapy (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007).

Peak House has an approach to ethics that is less concerned with philosophical and hypothetical judgements of right and wrong, and more attuned to the immediate demands of the lives of young people struggling with problematic substance use. We believe that ethics are not fixed and static principles but fluid and living practices that must orient us to being useful to the folks we serve. We are concerned with the extent to which our collective ethics inform our theories and practices, and assist us in helping youth struggling with exploitation, oppression and substance use in their lives (Everett, MacFarlane, Reynolds, & Anderson, 2013). At Peak House, we strive to breathe life into our ethical engagement by continually being open to new learning and new possibilities while holding on to important teachings from historical contexts and our own lived experiences.

Gender Group is one of the many therapeutic groups at Peak House that began and evolved due to the teachings provided by the youth coming through the doors. This specific group explores the interrelationships among substance misuse, gender and sexuality, systemic oppression and resistance.

History of Gender Group

Gender Groups helped me a lot at Peak. I said a lot of things there I don't think I would have said in any other group because I couldn't say them in front of men. (Jade)

Gender Group was co-created about 20 years ago alongside young women, in particular, who spoke about needing a safe space to talk about the impacts that sexualised violence, exploitation and what might be understood as a continuum of sex work had on

their lives, and how this was directly related to their problematic use of substances. One young woman asked if she could meet with one of the authors, Vikki Reynolds, as her therapist, and if all the women in the house could act as witnesses to their conversation. This brought to mind Vicki Dickerson's (2004) invitation for young women to act as 'allies against self-doubt'. The young woman's request resulted in our first meeting of female-identified¹ persons gathering in their own space. This enactment of intersectional feminism seemed quite revolutionary, but it also felt like we were excluding male-identified folks. At the time, Vikki Reynolds was also having conversations in individual therapy with young men who wanted to speak about their resistance to, participation in and subjugation by toxic masculinity, and this ended up creating the language of 'a culture of accountable men' (Reynolds, 2002), which became the frame for the male-identified persons' Gender Group. This opened a space for young men to speak about harms they experienced under patriarchy; a conversation there seemed to be no space for in the presence of young women – if there was a 'pissing contest' about harm, there would be no room for these young men's voices. We had youth in the program who did not identify with the gender binary of masculine and feminine, and so we always had a fluidity of Gender Group formations so that that youth could have spaces to speak to the oppression the gender binary promoted. None of this happened smoothly, and the presence of backlash was very real.

Gender Group has evolved since its inception 20 years ago as Peak House has continued to unlearn oppressive systems such as heteronormativity, cissexism and heterosexism. The group began with discussions that exposed ways that substance use has influenced and been influenced by gender, gender norms and gendered oppression (Carey & Russell, 2003). This enactment of practices structured from feminist theories was informed by diverse feminists, queer feminists (Butler, 1990) and women of colour and Black feminists (Hill Collins, 1998; Tamasese, 2001), most particularly the teachings of bell hooks (2000), that 'feminism is for everybody'. Over the years, young folks provided feedback and taught us about the importance of having conversations about sexuality as well as gender in relation to problematic substance use. These conversations began to examine connections between sexuality and substance use, *and* sexuality and gender, without conflating the two (Tamasese, 2003). As a result of youth wisdom and critique, we began to embrace more fluidity and flexibility. Now Gender Group is conducted based on the feedback

youth provide, the group dynamics present in the house and the concerns that are showing up in young people's lives.

Contextualising problematic substance use

Drugs kept me alive when I didn't want to live anymore. (Trysta)

Gender Group is an ethical response to the ways that oppression colludes with substance use. In fact, youth have taught us that it is often oppression that moves substance use into substance misuse. Gender Group creates space for dialogue at Peak House, and in the community at large, fostering solidarity and resistance to oppression – gender oppression in particular. The youth at Peak House have let us know that their substance use began or continued as a direct response to, and resistance against, oppression. Youth often share stories of continuously drinking to black out in order to not re-live experiences of trauma and violation connected to gender-based exploitation, rape and other forms of men's violence. Youth also describe using stimulants to stay awake and vigilant in order to prevent themselves or loved ones facing further gendered violence. Young people frequently tell us that they began using substances because of self-hate and shame, which are generated and promoted by gendered body policing, body-shaming practices, rape culture, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of hate-based oppression connected to patriarchy. Many young people describe using substances to prevent themselves from acting on their experiences of hate in the form of so-called suicide or self-harm (Reynolds, 2016), or as a way to tune out, escape their bodies and numb out these experiences.

Another way that systemic gender oppression and substance use collude with one another is through the ways substance use impacts and harms people based on gender identities and locations. For example, many female-identified youth describe how substance use carries risks for them such as exploitation, rape or other forms of men's violence – risks that male-identified youth are systematically less likely to experience. Trans and nonbinary youth have let us know of ways that substance use can carry specific risks for them, such as transphobic violence and exploitation, and of the myriad transphobic barriers to navigating the medical, criminal justice and mental health systems. Many trans and

nonbinary youth have been kicked out of their homes because of transphobia, and have no access to trans-inclusive spaces, housing or care (as many housing, treatment, medical and other resources in British Columbia are either 'co-ed' or gender segregated). Aaron Munro, a trans and housing activist, spoke to this: 'Homophobia and transphobia are so prevalent and powerful that they can actually convince parents to hate their own children' (in Munro, Reynolds, & Townsend, 2017, p. 151).

The youth at Peak House have taught us that their experiences of gender are inextricably linked to other domains of identity including, but not limited to, sexuality, age, class, race, ability, homelessness, looks, size and religion. Focusing simply on gender reduces and minimises the complexity of young people's lived experiences. An intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1995; Truth, 1851; Yuen & C. White, 2007) is woven into Gender Group, as demonstrated by Tiana, a racialised female-identified youth, who spoke about the ways her body and the colour of her skin could 'never be white enough' and the 'body shaming' associated with that. Young folks have named that being *othered* due to oppression instigates and feeds their substance use (Dennstedt & Grieves, 2004; Dulay, Krasnow, Reynolds, & Sampson, 2018; Sanders, 2007). Youth have shared that some of their intentional responses and resistance to the isolation and exclusion created by oppression have been to seek connection and belonging *through* substances: 'I finally belonged. They didn't care about my sexuality. It didn't matter. It was the first time I had friends' (Tiana).

If Gender Group is an ethical response to oppression, then there is an ethical requirement to address and acknowledge intersectionality. However, the requirement of holding this space goes beyond merely naming intersections; it is crucial that we, in a fluid and flexible way, recognise the confluence of those intersections (Joseph, 2015). Each young person's experience with systems will differ due to their relationships with and between the axes of oppression, including how time and history have impacted that young person.

Enacting accountability

I'm not a man but I can bet that they have a lot of issues too. Issues that they don't feel comfortable talking about in front of women. (Jade)

I don't want my mom or my girlfriend to be scared of me. I don't want to be like all those other guys out there who've hurt them ... I want to do better, and I want to show them the love and respect they deserve ... that's why I've got to stop using. (Tyler)

Gender Group is not only about witnessing the impacts of, and resistance to, gender-based oppression. Accountability is a crucial part of Gender Group. Historically, this involved young male-identified people exploring accountability in their own lives (Jenkins, 1990), and supporting one another to move away from oppressive and harmful ways of performing masculinity. For instance, male-identified youth at Peak House have engaged in conversations about consent, accountable allyship, ways to work against men's violence, and ways to be more supportive of female-identified and nonbinary people in their lives and communities. These conversations have often centred around challenging and unpacking hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005); they also entail the co-creation, enactment and honouring of forms of masculinity that embody compassion, vulnerability, care-giving and connection with emotions. The intent of these groups is not just to help young male-identified people practice vulnerability, but to make communities safe(r) for people of all genders by working to address men's violence with those who ought to be most accountable for transforming it. We hold this position in tension with an understanding that violence can be enacted by people of all genders.

While Gender Group at Peak House continues to incorporate conversations about accountable masculinity among male-identified youth and staff, there is also more fluid discussion of accountability. For example, Gender Group includes conversations about cis privilege, cisnormativity and transphobia, with the intention of working towards cis accountability and allyship from cis men and cis women, while always keeping in mind the intersections of male privilege and the oppression of women, nonbinary and trans persons. Our current practices also seek to create more space for the voices of trans and nonbinary youth. For example, Carl, a young trans man in our program, generously shared his wisdom about what he described as 'learning to be a guy versus being assigned one at birth'. Carl described how he had to 'figure out how to be a guy on [his] own', and how this included his rejection of harmful and violent forms of masculinity that he witnessed in many cis men. He shared that his ways of doing masculinity (Butler, 1990) centred around 'being strong to support my family, being kind, sensitive,

loving and being a provider; I can earn money for my family and I work hard, but I also rub my grandmother's feet and do my little sister's hair'. Carl's and many other teachings from trans and nonbinary youth have helped young cis men learn new and liberatory ways to do masculinity in their own lives (hooks, 2004).

Alongside accountability practices, Gender Group also employs practices that address power in and among the group of youth, and within and among the staff team. There are inherent power differences in being a staff member as staff are considered to be adults, have access to housing and are currently employed; however, other intersections and discrepancies of power also need to be addressed accountably. In Gender Group, the staff member is accountable to the spaces of power and privilege that they inhabit. They are required to continuously unlearn their privileges, decentre themselves and advocate for the youth. If certain power dynamics show up in the group of youth, the therapist needs to hold the group accountable. For instance, at Peak House, we have a 'diet-free zone' where youth and staff are asked to step away from body shaming and policing themselves and one another in relation to food (Epston, 2008). Since fat phobia teams up with gender oppression (Fat Panic!, personal communication; see also Fat Panic!, 2017), it is also connected to substance misuse. Sometimes folks use substances to not think about weight or to lose weight. This is the case mostly for female-identified, nonbinary and trans youth; however, male-identified youth also struggle with this. If youth and/or staff begin to engage in complimenting each other's bodies or how 'healthy' their food intake or body is, the therapist addresses these comments by inviting the group to explore how fatphobia teams up with gender and substance use. We also recognise that even folks co-located in the margins can still enact oppression; this requires skilled and complex responses from therapists.

Critically attending to language

Activists and communities of struggle continually resist normalising language and evoke language that creates spaces beyond inclusion. Peak House believes in ethically creating a space for young folks to explore, express and identify themselves. Peak House steps away from labelling and highlights the importance of being able to self-identify.

While Peak House honours the lived experiences of youth, we recognise the ways that queer spaces can be subject to fetishisation. Joel, a trans male-identified youth, shared his wisdom and resistance to this: 'Now

everyone is calling themselves trans or queer, like it's a trend or cool. It's just that simple or easy. I have never had it simple or easy. I have to fight every day to be seen, let alone understood'. In these moments, we examine how taking on identities that may not fit people's experiences can harm folks and appropriate pain. We are informed by the Policy of Respect (Mottet & Ohle, 2003) that emerged from critical trans theory and activism, meaning a person can self-identify their sexual or gender diversity, and not need to prove themselves to, or be approved by, the therapist or other power holders. We believe that it is important to honour and not appropriate, and that the space certain identities create is for folks who haven't been centred.

Resisting the binary while acknowledging the binary

In structuring Gender Group, we seek to resist binaries while simultaneously acknowledging the real impacts those binaries have on the young people in our program. This practice requires fluidity, and it is wholly and perhaps necessarily imperfect. The practice of resisting the binary while acknowledging its impacts informs all aspects of Gender Group, from the formation of topics to the choice of therapists to the spaces in which we hold these conversations. For instance, we set up groups by topic, not by the gender (self-identified or otherwise) of its participants or its therapists. We seek to have a minimum of three topic choices (and so, three separate groups) for participants to choose from at any given time, and these topics are themselves intended to challenge binaries (as opposed to having topics that in effect reinforce such binaries). Youth select their group and topic on the basis of their own identities, locations, experiences and expressions of gender. Topics have included: resisting gender binaries, codes of masculinities, strength and femininity, queering media and pop culture, objectification of women in media, and how care and compassion are part of masculinity.

As we resist and challenge prescribed gender binaries, we simultaneously seek to acknowledge the ways these binaries impact the worlds that young people engage in, and the ways those binaries continue to oppress and marginalise youth themselves. Binaries, as sociopolitical constructs, exist and persist as tools and weapons of heteropatriarchy, transphobia, cisnormativity and oppression. We address this in Gender Group by continuing to make space for conversations among male-identified youth and staff in relation to accountability, while also holding space for conversations among female-identified youth and staff

to foster solidarity, empowerment and the centring and amplification of women's, trans and nonbinary persons' voices.

Youth transforming communities

A further intention of Gender Group is to make space for youth to transform the culture at Peak House and their communities outside of Peak House. We seek to support young people to explore, critique and celebrate many aspects of gender, from gender politics to gender diversity. We do this for the purpose of challenging and resisting gender oppression, including transphobia, misogyny, cisnormativity and the many other tools of patriarchy. We also do this for the purpose of making Peak House itself a safe(r) space: one of trans-inclusivity, allyship, accountability and empowerment (Reynolds & Kelly, 2018). Many of our practices are brought forward by the young people themselves, who share their wisdom in Gender Group and carry that knowledge into the program, learning and unlearning together. Kayley, a young female-identified person in our program, spoke about her experience of 'finding her voice' in Gender Group. She explained that this was made possible through witnessing other young women expressing themselves, in her words:

The other women in here have broken silence and helped me realise I can be a part of that; I can use my voice too. I want to break silence for women who've been silenced before me, and to break silence for women and girls who'll come after me and will have a chance to speak. I want them all to know they're not alone. (Kayley)

Structure

I have different views than most people here, but I still feel comfortable sharing in this group. (Ben)

Although Gender Group isn't a formatted, manualised group, there are some structures that create a frame for working in fluid and flexible ways. Central to Gender Group is the process of structuring safety. The therapist needs to be intentional in holding the ethical frames and intentions, while collaborating with the youth in the process of co-constructing safety within conversations. Safety is relative, and fostering safety in a group setting means that safety needs to be continuously co-constructed in a necessarily fluid and imperfect way (Reynolds, 2014). The therapist is also required to dismantle systems of oppression while decentring themselves as knowledge keepers.

Safety in the structure

I've never talked about my gender and sexuality.
I couldn't do that anywhere else in my life.
(Roan)

Preselected topics are provided as options for groups based on youth input and the group dynamics. Young people write down their ideas for Gender Group on a weekly basis. The topics they create are prioritised. At times, if the staff notice or receive feedback from youth about dynamics in the group that replicate heteronormativity, patriarchy, misogyny and/or transphobia, then those topics may also be incorporated into Gender Group that week, enabling the youth's agency to resist and transform the group culture at Peak House.

Safety is negotiated within and among the participants of Gender Group. This process of negotiation varies depending on the participants of each group, including the youth and the staff. When selecting a group to participate in, youth are invited to choose the group that reflects their lived experiences, or the spaces they are exploring. Part of the knowledge passed on by youth has been the importance of having spaces that are occupied by folks who identify similarly. This fosters relational safety among group members, as articulated by Jade: 'I needed to be with women because if men were in group I'd have to say, "No offence to you, it's nothing against you, you're not like this man". I couldn't say exactly what I wanted because they'd get defensive and the whole focus is on men's feelings'. This also applies to our awareness of orientation: many youth speak about the ways they have resisted heteronormativity by choosing not to speak about their experiences because of real concerns about rejection, violence and exploitation. Some youth have shared that Gender Group was 'the first time' they experienced a sense of safety and solidarity in which they felt 'accepted'.

Once a group begins, the therapist might ask:

- What drew you to this topic?
- What had you choosing to have this conversation with me/us today?
- What were you hoping to get out of this particular conversation today?

Often, in that initial exchange, the therapist and the youth will collectively acknowledge that the topic on the board was simply a front that was used to create a safe-enough (Bird, 2000) opportunity to have a different and often more vulnerable conversation. For example,

perhaps a group of youth settle in to a room where they have chosen to have a discussion purportedly about 'self-love' as it relates to gender and reclaiming their lives from substances. As the youth and therapist settle in, they will quickly acknowledge that the group is not simply about self-acceptance per se, but about the real systemic barriers that get in the way of so-called 'self-love'. Depending on the youth present, these may include some combination of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism and fatphobia (to name only a few). The therapist often uses selective self-disclosure in relation to some of their identity locations so that the rest of the discussion can unfold based on allyship or solidarity between and among the staff and youth, depending on their locations. In the above example, the youth and therapist in a conversation about 'self-love' acknowledged that they shared identities of female-identified and pansexual. From this acknowledgment, the therapist and youth collaboratively unpacked the specific societal messages and experiences that promote messages of hate and judgement to folks from these specific locations. In this respect, the dialogue in Gender Group shifts from a unilateral 'you' and 'me' to an 'us' and 'we'. Depending on which youth and staff have arrived for that conversation – and the relative safety in the room that exists as a result of that – the conversation will unfold from that place.

Whenever possible, therapists reflect the spaces that the groups represent. One youth expressed generously, 'It's not that you don't get it, but I'd rather talk to someone who's trans, who lives it. I can have conversations with them that I can't have with you'. This insight and feedback urged us to find creative ways of ensuring that this could happen whenever possible, such as inviting staff members and hiring people to facilitate specific groups.

Fluidity and flexibility

We all need to get as much out of this program as possible so the variety [of topics for Gender Group] helps us get to focus on what we need to focus on. (Leila)

Remaining fluid is an ethical imperative that is central to Gender Group at Peak House – whether this fluidity is in relation to the selection of group topics, the groups' structures, the directions taken in the conversations themselves, who is given more or less space, whose voices are centred, who is facilitating or even the physical spaces in which conversations take place. As mentioned earlier, we strive to work in fluid and flexible ways that resist binaries while acknowledging

the impacts of those binaries on the youth. We hold on to this fluidity while remaining in constant conversation about the imperfection of this practice.

Welcoming young people's lived experiences in flexible and fluid ways fosters a therapeutic atmosphere in which people can share their experiences with more vulnerability. Countless times youth have told us that they feel safe enough to be themselves in Gender Group. Gia stated: 'I can be *me* here. I don't have to hide'. Within these spaces, the youth have more autonomy and choice in sharing their experiences: space becomes safe(r). As one male-identified youth shared: 'This is the first space where I can wear makeup without anyone questioning my gender, my masculinity'.

Part of working in fluid and flexible ways is negotiating the structure of Gender Group. We try to structure safety so that youth can have these conversations without fear for the safety of themselves and their communities. This, however, is an imperfect practice. Some youth have spoken about how they don't want to be 'outed' in the group or in their lives outside of Peak House: 'I can't talk about my experiences in Gender Group without being outed'. In these instances, when youth want to engage in Gender Group while maintaining safety, opportunities for conversations that are one-to-one with a staff member may be offered, rather than conversations with other youth in the house. At times, these conversations have been able to happen with a few folks in the house together. These opportunities are negotiated with the youth at all times: first individually and then together as a group. Some youth speak about wanting to have conversations outside the binary as their experience differs from the group around sexuality: 'They all talk about their boyfriends. I can't talk about my relationships. They just don't get it'. In these instances, we hold groups with the specificity of that young person's sexuality. We attempt to invite a safe(r) space for the youth by acknowledging the differences in experiences around gender and sexuality without conflating gender and sexuality. Informed by youth wisdom and critique, we are continuously exploring ways to become more fluid and thereby make these practices more useful to the youth.

Positioning of the therapist

Gender Group requires a specific ethical and relational stance from the therapists who facilitate it. This cannot be severed from the history and the contexts in which Gender Group emerged and developed at Peak House.

Understanding the positioning of the therapist in Gender Group is also inseparable from an understanding of the ethics and intentions of Gender Group, as described earlier. In Gender Group, therapists are decentred but influential (M. White, 2007); they take a stand against oppressive ideas and dynamics when they show up, and are intentionally fluid with boundaries for the purpose of belonging youth.

Decentring the therapist

Once a group is set up, the therapist works to carefully position themselves so that the young people's wisdoms are at the centre (Dulay et al., 2018), rather than their own personal and professional agendas and knowledges. The centring of youth wisdom and decentring of the therapist (M. White, 2007) is reflected, at the outset, in the therapist's manoeuvring of space. For example, if a group is being held in the therapist's office, the therapist may choose to vacate their chair for a youth and/or sit on the floor while the youth sit on the furniture. If a group is being held around the kitchen table or in the yard outside, the therapist may sit among the youth in a circle. If Gender Group is being organised around the showing of a certain video, again the therapist will sit among the youth and watch the video alongside them, as opposed to sitting at the front beside the video where their body positioning would suggest that they have 'seen it all' or 'know this stuff already' and aren't implicated. This humbled, decentred and implicated position is especially important in the context of a therapeutic practice like Gender Group because the shared and differing intersectional identities of the youth and staff in the room can form both the frame and the content of the conversations that unfold. For an hour each week, the mask of professionalism is performatively and intentionally lifted so that circles of people can have generative conversations that acknowledge shared locations and sources of oppression, while exchanging and witnessing stories of hardship, resistance, inspiration, community and belonging. In Gender Group showing up this way is both performative and required.

As the discussion unfolds, the therapist works to resist lecturing and to locate knowledge within the youths' experiences (Dulay et al., 2018) and their tactics of resistance (Coates & Wade, 2007; Reynolds, 'Bahman', Hammoud-Beckett, Sanders, & Haworth, 2014). The youth in the room work alongside the staff to collaboratively unpack, dissect, resist and transform existing discourses and practices related to gender. This collaborative approach decentres notions of therapist expertise that are upheld by both

professionalism and ageism. Rather than the therapist lecturing about feminism, or warning the youth about the pitfalls of consuming misogynistic, pop culture media, the therapist asks questions that invite the youth to share their own opinions and values, name sources of hardship and oppression, take a stand on their own terms, or share stories about ways they have resisted or fought back against injustices previously. The therapist will step in, however, if or when oppressive notions show up in the room. When this is required, the therapist will still try to do so in a decentred and hopefully non-patronising way. Say the youth start talking about how they hate 'feminazis', constructing feminists as angry women who hate men, the therapist will step in to acknowledge how social movements based on human rights often receive backlash, and mention this (mis)conception of feminism so widely upheld as an example of that; from there, the therapist will get the youth to respond and offer their thoughts, which they always do.

Professional boundaries and vulnerability

While the therapist works hard to decentre (M. White, 2007) themselves and resist lecturing, their position in the room is inherently influential. Since the discussions in Gender Group are often risky, it is essential that the therapist acknowledge their position of power and use their influence to the benefit of the youth. For example, say a certain staff member is out to a certain youth who is out-to-them but not out-to-everyone at Peak House, and this staff and youth have settled into a Gender Group together. That staff member will work hard to resist lecturing about either the benefits or pitfalls of coming out, but they may intentionally step in to share their experiences when doing so is essential to spreading hope and belonging (Reynolds, 2002). Here we are informed by the work of Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett (2007), an Australian narrative therapist from Muslim culture, and her approach to working with Muslim youth who do not identify as heterosexual. Hammoud-Beckett resists the Western imperatives to 'come out' and 'self-actualise', which are fraught with structural harms for Muslim youth. Instead, youth may choose to 'welcome in' people who are worthy of trust into their lives and into their knowings and expressions of their identities (Hammoud-Beckett, 2007). We have found that this approach structures both autonomy and safety, while resisting the binary of being out versus being closeted. The practice of *welcoming in* opens up

more spaces for safety and belonging than offered by the Eurocentric binary of out versus closeted, thereby creating more 'spaces of justice' (Lacey, 2005) that help youth find sites of belonging. The importance of these spaces cannot be understated: co-creating spaces of justice and belonging tether youth to the planet and resist enactments of hate/homophobia/transphobia that get labelled 'suicide' (Reynolds, 2016).

In Gender Group, boundaries around self-disclosure are intentionally spacious and flexible. The youths' benefit remains at the centre of any decision as to whether to disclose or not, and how much. In Gender Group, staff disclose not to meet their own needs to be witnessed or obtain the therapeutic benefits of the group, but for the sake of amplifying a sense of safety and belonging for the youth. However, there is a certain type of safety and belonging that could not be offered to youth with locations of marginalisation without the staff risking their own vulnerability and offering some morsel of self-disclosure. Often in Gender Group, staff will share their own stories for the purpose of giving hope to queer, questioning and nonbinary youth that 'you will find your people', thus speaking to the transformations that are possible once one (re)discovers community, aligning with Peak House's ethic of belonging (Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). Alongside self-disclosure, different therapists have been invited to Gender Group, given their locations, to further spread stories of hope and transformation.

Immeasurable outcomes

Like all the work at Peak House, Gender Group is emergent from an ethical stance of justice-doing that acknowledges and upholds youth wisdom. This is an approach that generates immeasurable outcomes. By this we mean outcomes that are unmeasurable, ineffable and possibly untraceable. These outcomes include safety, experiencing dignity, being witnessed and being truly seen. Youth often tell us, 'At Peak you *get me*'. How much is this worth? How can it be measured? There are also important 'unhappenings' that don't get measured in the work we do, such as when a young person's attempt at suicide doesn't happen because they experience belonging.

'Therapeutic value'

Gender Group gives you an opportunity to talk about the real effects that substance and gender had on you, and you know we'll come up with

strategies on how you can stand up to that and its really helpful. (Jade)

Gender Group is a unique therapeutic practice with benefits and possibilities that are far greater than those that are typically captured within the discourse of best practice, outcome measures and evidence-based treatment. After a recent Gender Group session, a female-identified youth, Daphne, exclaimed: 'I feel stronger!' Where will this 'stronger' take her in her journey reclaiming her life from substances? Can this outcome be replicated? How can this 'stronger' be measured?

In Gender Group, youth get the opportunity to break the silence, use their voice and be heard (Newman, 2008). Youth find alliances with others like them after years of feeling they 'were the only one'. Youth feel empowered as they begin to acknowledge the wisdom inherent in the tactics of resistance they have used to survive and fight back against gender/sexual oppression, after years of having those tactics dismissed, ridiculed, pathologised or criminalised. Youth find pride where there was shame, connection where there was isolation, alliances where there were divides. Gender Group weaves a sense of solidarity and belonging among the youth, across the divide between youth and staff, and into the wider community. In this sense, the outcomes of Gender Group often extend beyond individualistic understandings of therapeutic benefit. Moreover, as a result of experiencing belonging and safe(r) spaces, a youth may *not* act on hateful thoughts, *not* overdose, or get out of the world of survival sex and exploitation. These are 'unhappenings': benefits that can't be measured because they are things that *don't occur*. These can also be understood through the frame of harm reduction.

Harm reduction

I can always ask, 'What would Nia say?' when I go back home. I don't need to be alone in it. I *know I'm not alone in it*. (Yara)

The work done by young people and the wisdom that they share in Gender Group reduces harm. Many youth have let us know that they engage differently with the world, in safe(r) ways, because of their conversations and learnings in Gender Group. For example, many female-identified youth have formed connections of solidarity with one another, challenging the isolation and silencing imposed by patriarchal forces such as men's violence against women. Some youth have described how they have carried these connections of solidarity to other women outside of Peak House so they could

continue to help one another stay safe(r) and stay connected to support.

Young people at Peak House often describe how Gender Group has helped them change their ideas and practices in relationships, for instance incorporating new understandings of consent, safety and respect. One young female-identified person described learning that 'love isn't just about how someone feels about me or what they want from me ... it's about how they treat me! Love is what you do, not just what you say!' Many youth also report leaving risky or abusive relationships, and many male-identified youth engage with their families, loved ones and communities in more accountable and safe(r) ways. Youth also describe learning to trust their own wisdom more when it comes to safety and to their own boundaries.

Through their work in Gender Group, the youth also challenge many patriarchal, gendered shaming practices, including those relating to bodies, gender roles, sexuality and transphobia. Often youth describe developing 'self-love' and 'self-acceptance' in direct challenge to these oppressive practices, and have told us that this self-love actually reduces their desire to use substances. Kierra, a female-identified youth, described this: 'now that I'm not ashamed of who I am, I don't need to use ... I'm just happy with myself and I know I deserve better'.

Youth wisdom

I always knew that these things [oppression of women] were wrong, but I just had no-one else in my life agreeing with me ... now that I've heard other women talk about this, it's like 'I knew it all along! I'm not crazy!' (Esme)

Through Gender Group, many young people discover that they hold more knowledge than they themselves thought, or than they had been given credit for previously. Youth wisdom is central to our ethics and practices at Peak House; we seek to centre the knowledge, strengths and voices of youth while challenging ageism and the silencing practices that so often invalidate youth wisdom in our society (Dulay et al., 2018). In Gender Group, the topics are generated and suggested by the youth themselves and the format is one of dialogue, within which the youth's voices, experiences, ideas and knowledges are centred and given privilege. Young people often share that the most transformative and useful aspects of Gender Group

have come from hearing, connecting with and engaging in such discussions alongside other youth. After speaking with their peers, many youth come to trust and value their own analyses and awareness about topics such as gender oppression, safety, systems of power, social media and systemic barriers, and often find themselves carrying that knowledge forward into their lives. This is particularly important in challenging aspects of patriarchy that silence and invalidate the wisdom of female-identified people, and many female-identified youth use Gender Group to raise their voices and validate their own knowledge.

Lateral mentoring

It makes such a difference to hear from someone who's been there that there's hope ... I never thought things would get better until I heard others who've been through the same thing, and seeing how they're doing so good now ... so now I think, maybe I can do that, too. (Nicola)

Closely connected to youth wisdom is lateral mentoring (N. Arthur, personal communication, March 1, 2010). In Gender Group, youth mentor one another and create connections of solidarity and mutual inspiration. Many youth have let us know that their conversations with other youth in Gender Group helped them learn how to trust themselves, love themselves, use their voice to advocate for themselves and others, be accountable allies, reach out for support, and break out of silence and isolation. Often hearing that others have faced similar forms of gender oppression has helped young people to see that they are not alone, and that oppressive forms of violence and abuse that may have happened to them are not their fault.

Gender Group transforming communities

It's important for me to be a role model for my little brother. I grew up thinking I can't show my emotions. I don't want him growing up that way. (Jordan)

Families and loved ones of youth in our program have informed us that they themselves made changes based on teachings their youth have brought home. For example, one female-identified youth returned home and had difficult conversations with the male-

identified members of her family, including her siblings, father, grandfather and uncles. She spoke to them about listening to and respecting her mother and grandmother in new ways, and in doing so brought about big changes in her family. One male-identified youth returned home and opened up conversations of vulnerability and connection with other men in his family, something they reported had not been done before. We were told that this brought their family closer together. Young people have also described the ways they have challenged gender binaries and gender roles in their homes, thereby making space for all people (especially their younger siblings or children) to see, perform and explore gender in more fluid, creative and expansive ways.

Gender Group supports youth in transforming their own communities. Many young people return to their social circles, schools and communities and share their discoveries from Gender Group, inviting others to learn and change with them. Young people often describe standing alongside others as allies more, or changing their own practices and ways of being to create more inclusivity and safety for all. Many trans and nonbinary youth express the importance of making connections and building communities by connecting with other youth, staff and community supports who are trans and nonbinary. Some trans and nonbinary youth have described meeting for the first time someone else who was trans, or even having their first conversations about gender identity and gender diversity in Gender Group at Peak House. Many female-identified youth challenge a patriarchal culture of competition by forming alliances with other female-identified folks, and carrying these alliances forward to combat the widespread isolation and the silencing of feminine voices. Some youth even express changing the ways they and others consume or participate in media. One young person exclaimed 'Gender Group ruined radio for me!' after listening to, and deciding to switch off, a particularly misogynistic commercial that came on while they were listening to their favourite station.

Youth in Gender Group have also transformed the community of Peak House. The wisdom that young people have shared informs and often initiates these changes. For instance, we changed our clothing guidelines following a series of Gender Group discussions among female-identified youth who raised questions around body policing, body shaming, fatphobia and misogyny. Youth resisted the staff's surveillance and judgement of the clothing of female-identified, nonbinary and trans youth, and the clothing of youth whose bodies are open to judgement,

objectification, sexualisation and fetishisation. The young people's analyses challenged us to shift our clothing guidelines so as to avoid replicating or colluding with these oppressive practices. As a result, and in consultation with those youth, Peak House changed our clothing guidelines.

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Note

- ¹ This language emerged from our therapeutic work at Peak House alongside trans and nonbinary youth and staff. This intentional use of language aims 1) to move away from notions of gender as a totalised identity; and 2) to make space for those who self-identify differently from how they present and/or from the assumed/assigned genders others subject them to. We recognise the imperfections of this language in our therapeutic work and documentation as it reinforces the gender binary.

Emerging transformations

The Gender Group at Peak House is not a manualised procedure but an emergent practice that is centred in the ethics of justice-doing and collaborative practice that are at the heart of Peak House. The group is fluidly responsive to needs of youth, and structured to centre safety and make space for the voices of youth in response to myriad interlocking oppressions and experiences. When we collectively celebrate and acknowledge the autonomous choices, acts of resistance and lived experiences of youth who are often erased, subjugated, oppressed and marginalised, we create more spaces of justice for everyone. The usefulness of Gender Group lies in its catalytic validity (Lather, 1993), meaning that the work is important for what it can *do*, not what it can measure. The reflexivity of Gender Group is greatly informed by youth wisdom and their insightful critique, which has been expansive and illuminating. The collective dialogue from inside the practice is breathing new life into the ever-emerging doing of Gender Group.

Dedication

To three decades of youth who have come to Peak House and moved, challenged, informed, transformed and educated us about what is required to be of use. To all youth from sexual and gender diverse locations, especially those for whom we were and are not safe enough to be 'out' with.

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