

## **PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND HEALTH**

### **Lesson Plan 4: Causes of the Causes: What Are the Root Causes of This Problem?**

Goal: Participants learn to identify the root causes of a problem and see the connection between proximate and ultimate factors.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson plan, participants will be able to:

- Diagram the root causes of a problem
- Differentiate between proximate and ultimate causes of a problem
- List three root causes for a problem

Materials:

- Paper (blank)
- colored pens or pencils

Time Required: About 1 hour (depends on the number of participants, including everyone sharing their diagram)

Background: How can you identify the root causes of a problem?

“Causes of the Causes”<sup>1</sup> diagramming is an analysis tool that can be used to parse out the “upstream” contributing factors in any problem. Causal diagramming aids in critical thinking by helping people analyze issues beyond their most obvious, immediate causes. Causal diagramming also assists in discussing controversial or highly charged issues because through diagramming, people readily identify causes that extend beyond individual behaviors. This makes it an effective tool for discussing social issues without resorting to over-simplified victim blaming.

This exercise is one of JHA’s standard exercises which we have been teaching since 2004 to explore the root causes of a problem. We have conducted this exercise with all ages and on all types of problems with many different sized groups. Examples of problems that our participants have diagrammed are: homelessness, depression, smoking, drug addiction, diabetes, lead levels in children, asthma, hate crimes, youth in prison, war, etc. Two of the diagrams in the examples at the end of this document (asthma prevalence and lead levels) are related to environmental justice (EJ) concerns in South Park, Seattle, Washington).

“Causes of the causes” can be used as an extension exercise after several EJ lesson plans (2, 5, 6, 7). The exercise can be repeated over and over again for different *why* questions. Alternatively, the students can add to their diagrams as they delve more deeply into the subject matter, become more sophisticated, and go higher upstream. In the second example diagram below (asthma prevalence), our students were not familiar with Seattle’s racist restrictive covenant history that led to many policy decisions that followed. We have provided some “causes of the causes” questions in Lesson Plans 2, 5, 6, and 7.

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<sup>1</sup> From Marmot, Michael, Social Determinants of Health Inequalities, Lancet 2005, 365:1099-104.

Suggested Preparation for the Teacher/Facilitator:

- Marmot, Michael, Social Determinants of Health Inequalities, Lancet 2005, 365:1099-104.
- Rakku's story, from Questioning the Solution by David Werner.  
[http://www.healthwrights.org/hw/content/books/QTS/qts\\_ch01.pdf](http://www.healthwrights.org/hw/content/books/QTS/qts_ch01.pdf)

Activity Instructions:

- 1) Class/group exercise:
  - a) We start with an example, using a simple poem called "Why is Jason in the Hospital?," which is read out loud to the participants.

**Why is Jason in the hospital?<sup>2</sup>**

"Why is Jason in the hospital?  
 Because he has a bad infection in his leg.  
 But why does he have an infection?  
 Because he has a cut on his leg and it got infected.  
 But why does he have a cut on his leg?  
 Because he was playing in the junkyard next to his apartment building and there was some sharp, jagged steel there that he fell on.  
 But why was he playing in a junk yard?  
 Because his neighbourhood is kind of run down. A lot of kids play there and there is no one to supervise them.  
 But why does he live in that neighbourhood?  
 Because his parents can't afford a nicer place to live.  
 But why can't his parents afford a nicer place to live?  
 Because his Dad is unemployed and his Mom is sick.  
 But why is his Dad unemployed?  
 Because he doesn't have much education and he can't find a job.  
 But why ...?"

- b) Diagram Jason's situation (See "Jason in Hospital figure below).
  - i) The facilitator draws the causal diagram for Jason's infection on the board in stepwise fashion. Start with "Jason in the hospital" at the bottom of the board and then begin to ask a series of "why" questions to generate the next level of causality.
  - ii) *Prompt:* Why is Jason in the hospital? Participants yell out: Because he has an infection in his leg.
  - iii) *Prompt:* Why does he have an infection in his leg? .....

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<sup>2</sup> From "Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians" at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/phdd/determinants/index.html#determinants>

iv) In the case of the Jason poem, all of the answers are contained in the poem. Once you get to the end of the poem, you can lead the group in asking more questions, such as “what might be some reasons that Jason’s dad doesn’t have a job?”

v) Causal diagramming can continue until the participants run out of answers to the next series of “why” questions. Oftentimes, there might be many answers to a “why” question. The idea is to write all of them down and then continue down one “branch” until the “whys” are exhausted. Then go back to another branch, and so on. (See examples at the end of this document.)

Note: An alternate reading that we have used for a more in-depth example of causal diagramming (in addition to the Jason poem) is a two-page story called “The Life and Death of One Child: Rakku’s story.” When we use this example, we hand out a copy for each participant to read and circle every single potential cause of Rakku’s baby’s death. In each paragraph, they may have several causes circled. We then work through a causal diagramming of Rakku’s baby’s death.

## 2) Individual specific cause diagramming exercise:

### a) Prompt:

We are now going to draw our own causal diagrams for Problem \_\_\_\_\_.

There is no “correct” format for diagramming – you can invent your own way to draw the causal chains. The most important part of the exercise is that you try and go as far upstream as you can in asking “why” questions.

Note: Some example diagrams are attached below. Some participants like to see examples and you can show a few below (depending on audience) but encourage them to be creative.

### b) Individual problem:

What is an issue you are working on or that you are passionate about? What are the determinants (root causes) of the problem you are working on?

Diagram it on a blank piece of paper.

### c) Group problem:

When we work in big groups, there might be just one big question. For example, at a War & Global Health conference held at the University of Washington in 2010, we asked a large group of participants: “Why do wars occur?” Individuals worked on their own for 10 minutes, then broke up into pairs and shared their perspectives for 10 minutes. We then mapped the diagram on the board. (<http://justhealthaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/war-causes-of-the-causesclg.jpg>)

## 3) Sharing diagrams and concluding thoughts:

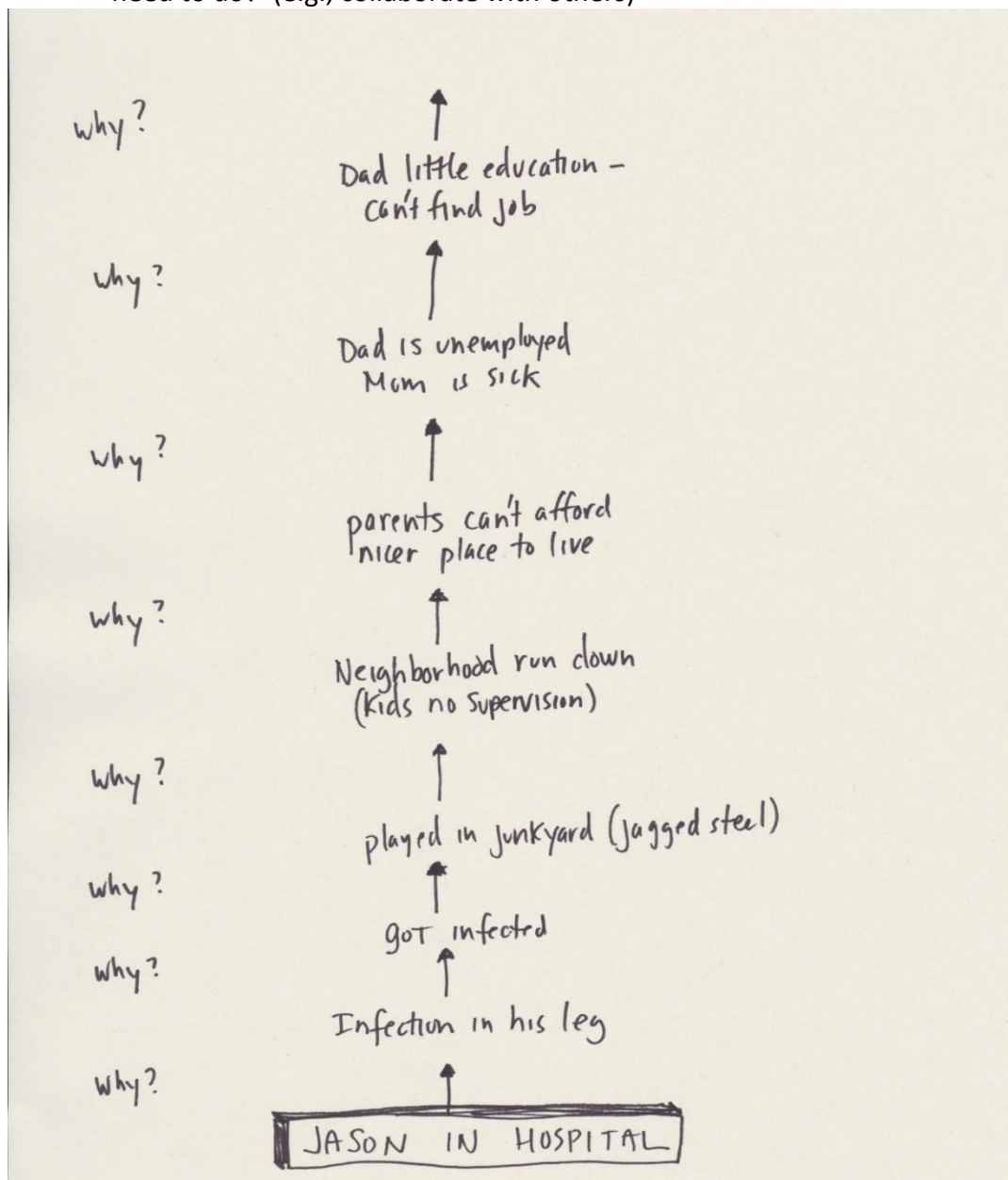
Here are some questions we have asked, which will vary depending on the group:

### Prompts:

a) Are there a few common root causes that are common over all or most of the diagrams that we have reviewed?

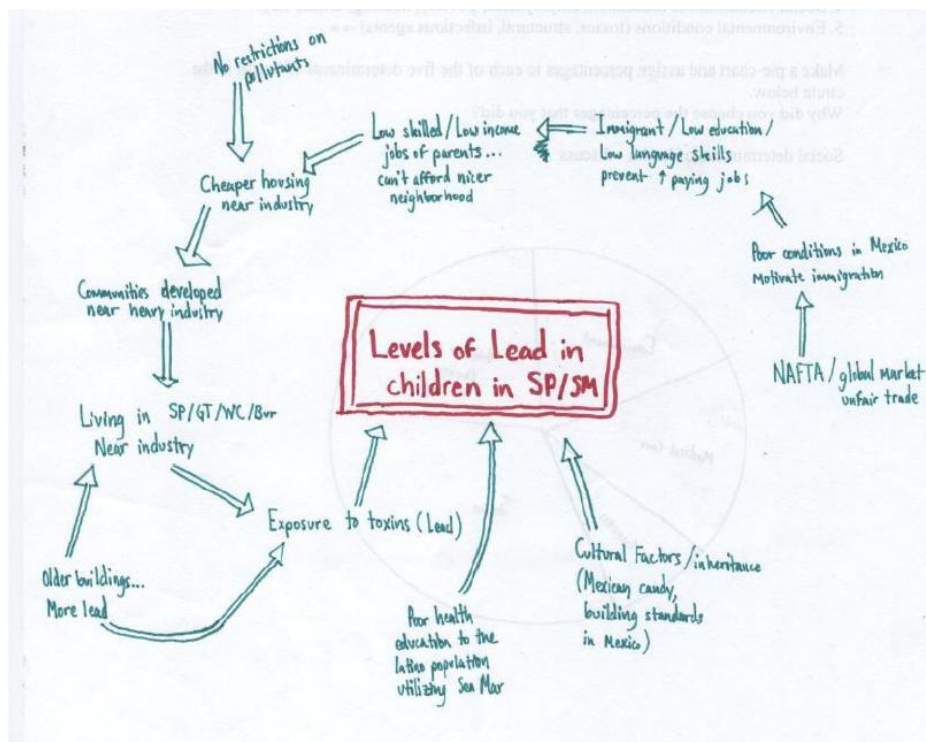
b) Are there some causes that seem more important to address than others? If so, you could make those lines heavier on your diagram.

- c) Do you know if there is evidence that some root causes have more impact than others?
- d) Now that you think about these root causes, how has this diagramming changed your perspective on the problem you drew? (e.g., victim blaming)
- e) If you want to take action on a root cause in your community, which one would you pick and what are some things that you and your community could do? (Note: JHA has another exercise called "Solutions to the Causes" <http://justhealthaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/JHA-Solutions-to-the-causes-lesson-plan.pdf> when we are developing action plans for a chosen problem or see Lesson Plan 1, Part 3)
- f) What about taking action on root causes farther upstream? What do you need to do? (e.g., collaborate with others)





Causes of the Causes Diagramming: Asthma Prevalence in South Park, White Center, and Georgetown, Washington. Community Action for Clean Air- EPA Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Grant

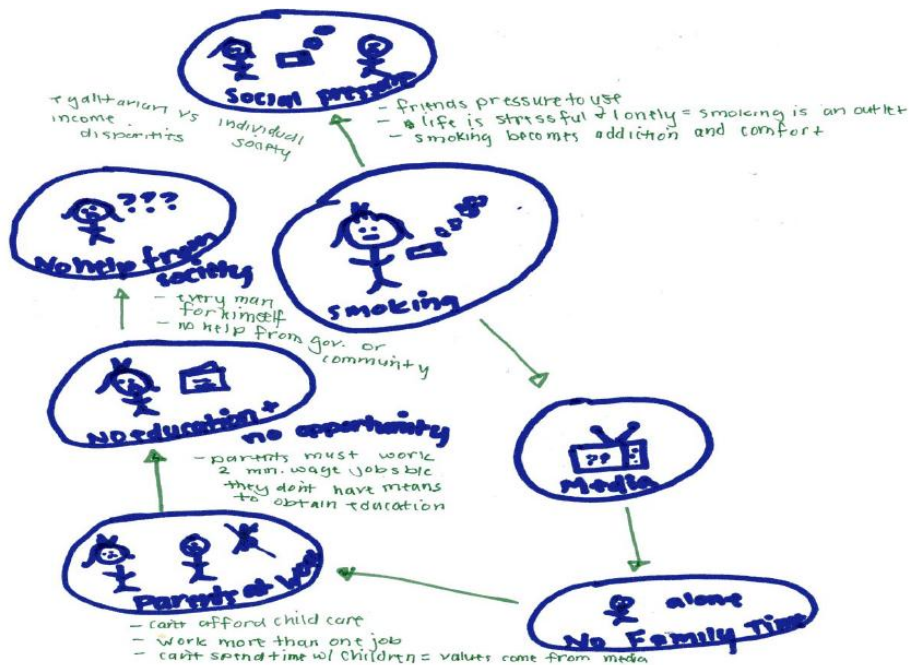


Causes of the Causes Diagramming: Levels of lead in children in South Park, Washington

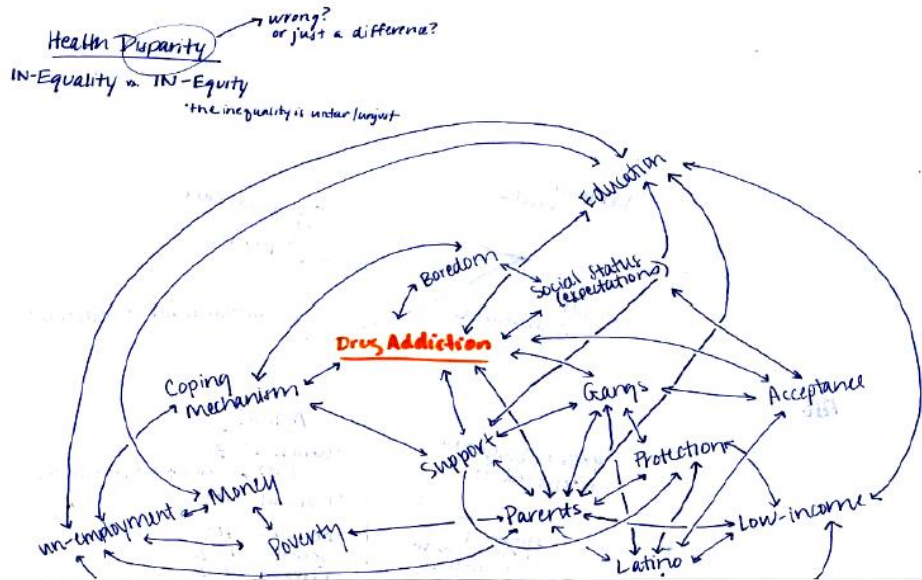




Causes of the Causes diagramming: Pyramid to prison for South Park youth



Causes of the Causes Diagramming: "Smoking" (Ann Ngo, AmeriCorps - Sea Mar Community Health Centers, Seattle, WA)



Causes of the causes diagramming: Drug addiction (Sea Mar Community Health Centers)