

“Causes of the Causes” Diagramming Methodology

Area of JHA’s Critical Health Literacy Framework: *Knowledge*

Goal: Learn to identify the root causes of a problem and see the connection from underlying to proximate determinants.

Materials: Paper and colored pens / pencils

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

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

“Causes of the causes”¹ 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.

JHA uses this exercise to teach the root causes of health inequities in workshops and classes. This example works at all age levels and on all types of problems. Examples of problems that our students have diagrammed are homelessness, depression, smoking, drugs, a sick infant, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, hate crimes, Latino youth in prison, etc.

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

Facilitator instructions:

1) Class/Group Exercise

- a) We often start with an example, using a simple poem called “why is Jason in the hospital,” which is read out loud to the participants.

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

Why is Jason in the hospital

"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 junk yard 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 ...?"²

b) Together, the participants draw a causal diagram for Jason's infection on the board. Start with "Jason in the hospital" in the center of the board and then begin to ask a series of "why" questions to generate the next level of causality. 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?"

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.)

[An alternate reading that we have used for a more in-depth example of causal diagramming (in addition to the Jason poem) is a 2 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 and have them read the story and circle every single potential cause of Rakku's baby's death. In each paragraph, they may have several causes circled. Then we work through a causal diagramming of Rakku's baby's death.]

² 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>

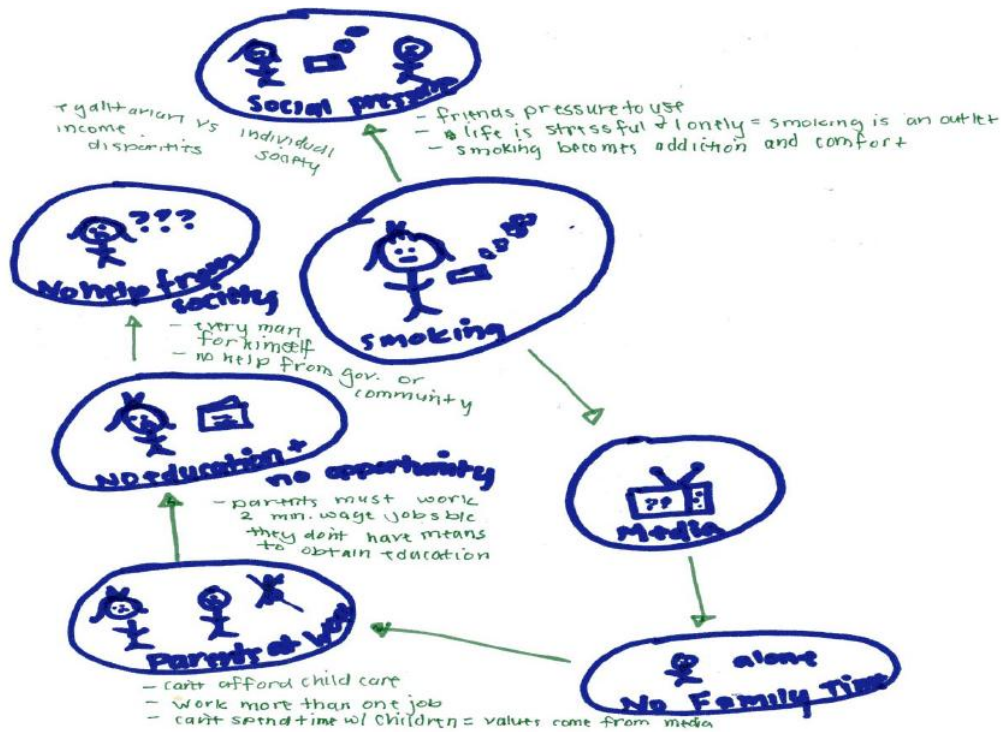
2) Individual exercise

- a) What is the 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. Some example diagrams are attached below.

Note: there is no “correct” format for diagramming – people can invent their own way to draw the causal chains. The most important part of the exercise is that participants be exhaustive in asking “why” questions.

3) Class, get together and share/explain your diagram.

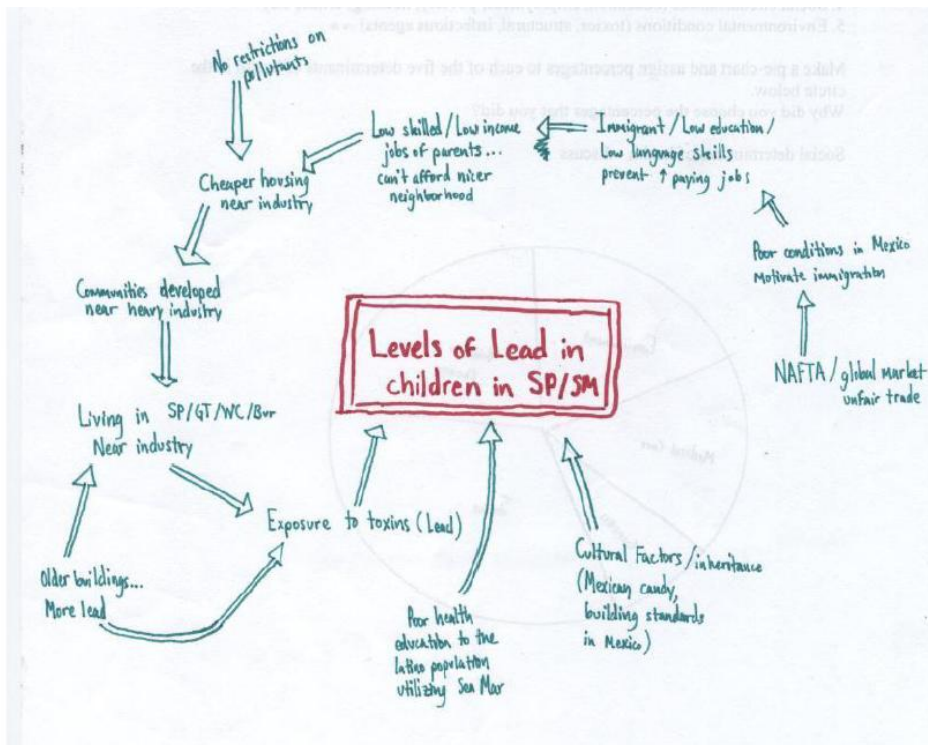
Are there a few common root causes (social determinants of health) that cross over all or most of the class?



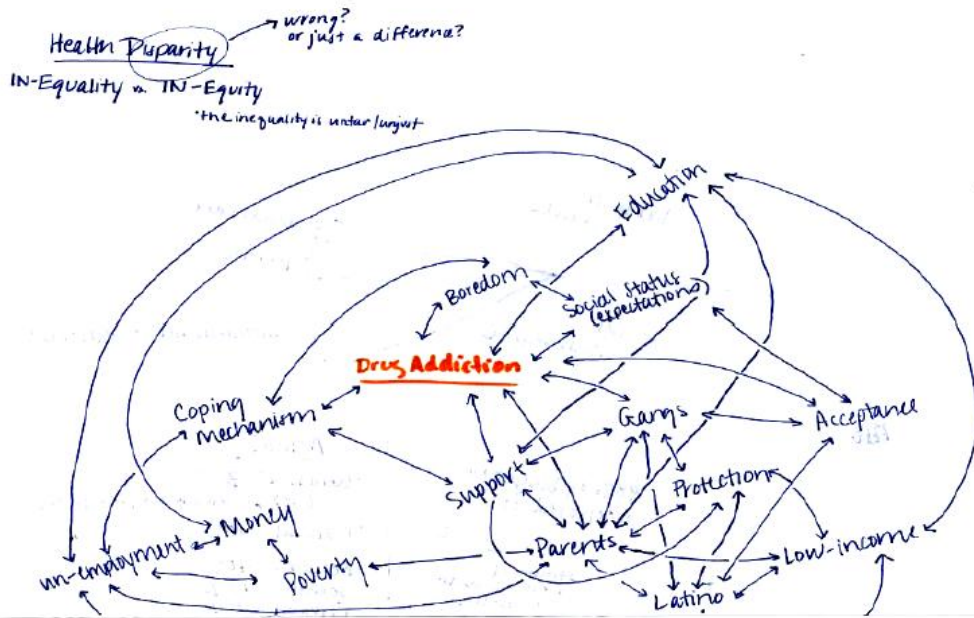
Causes of the Causes Diagramming: “Smoking” (Ann Ngo, AmeriCorps - Sea Mar Community Health Centers, Seattle, WA)



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



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



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