Title: Understanding youth agency in context – a critical realist approach to youth mental health research

Body:

Youth mental health research and service provision internationally has been described as “paradigm-shifting”, with attention directed to early intervention with adolescents and young adults as a public health issue. However, the philosophy of science underpinning the field has not been interrogated comprehensively, and efforts to integrate process-focused qualitative research with outcome-focused quantitative research are in its infancy. This paper outlines four principles that can support the evolution of youth mental health research, drawing from critical realism, to align the philosophy of research in the field with its context. These are (1) ontological realism, facilitating an understanding of youth and family lived experience within services and social determinants; (2) epistemic pluralism, inclusive of mixed-methods and participatory research designs, and reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the field; (3) judgemental rationality, emphasising transparent self-reflection of researchers, recognising how perspectives and backgrounds of research teams may influence the research process and analysis; and (4) an axiological focus on agency, whereby youth outcomes are understood through an empowerment lens for young people and their families, beyond symptom reduction alone. The implications will be discussed in relation to fostering inclusive research while maintaining rigour, as well as recommendations for conducting future research applying these principles.