Attempting to Engage in "Ethical" Research with Homeless Youth

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Abstract

Risk pervades contemporary discourses surrounding and describing homeless youth. Deemed to be *at risk* and vulnerable to a range of dangers related to living on the street as well as *risky* due to their delinquent behaviours, homeless youth tend to be reduced to narrow conceptualizations bereft of complexity, variability, or respect for individual agency. Largely left out of dominant discourses are youths' own voices, perceptions, and experiences relative to their individual efforts to engage in, confront, and negotiate the various risks associated with street life. In this article, I explore my own attempts, as a social work practitioner and budding researcher, to engage in research that aimed at destabilizing dominant discourses of homeless youth and privileging homeless youths' diverse articulations of risk in their day-to-day lives. Specifically, I describe my lack of acumen related to positionality and subjectivity and to asymetrical power dynamics. I propose ways in which I could have better reflected upon, and negotiated, these issues in my doctoral project as lessons for future researchers, in particular, practitioner-researchers. I argue that bridging subjectivity, situated ethics, and anti-oppressive research practices may provide meaningful ways to address these misgivings.

Keywords: homeless youth, risk, practitioner-researcher, power/knowledge, ethics, subjectivity, anti-oppression

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Tara is sixteen years of age and states that she is a responsible injection drug user. Tara shuffled into and out of emergency shelters, foster homes, and family shelters after her parents' separation a few years ago. She made a gradual, more permanent move to the streets after her mother was no longer able to care for her and her father was too abusive to live with. Tara explains that her current boyfriend whom she lives with on the streets introduced her to injection drugs. Their daily routine consists of making $20 a day (in several different legal and illegal ways) to acquire the drugs they need to maintain their usage. Tara is a bright, articulate, and vocal advocate for safe injection drug use and harm reduction, and was given a position in a youth drop-in centre as a peer support worker because of her experience and her ability to communicate her insights. Ironically, she hides her drug use and her risky homeless behaviours (such as sleeping in the streets) from youth services providers in order to maintain her eligibility for this kind of work and to serve as a "good role model" for other youths. She also employs various strategies to keep herself safe from sexual predators when she is using or acquiring

substances. For example, she is dependent on her boyfriend to acquire the drugs she needs because of the risk of sexual exploitation: sellers urging her to trade sex for drugs, offering her loaded needles, or refusing to sell to her at all because of her young age. Tara describes her desire and engagement to continue using, equating this yearning as a relationship of sorts to her drug use. She describes in length its orienting features, how it helps organize her day, and her incessant worries about becoming ill if she cannot access the drugs she needs. She admits she worries her employer will find out about her drug use and she will lose the only form of reliable income she has, which she considers essential to her continued drug use to prevent becoming ill from withdrawal. She reiterates that experiencing withdrawal is her greatest fear.

Tara's story sums up the intricate complexities with which homeless youth negotiate risk. These complexities and injustices represent the ethical drivers of the study that will be presented in the following pages. While homeless youth are characterized by their risky behaviours, we know little about how they conceptualize and manage risk in their everyday lives. In this article, I draw on my doctoral research (MacDonald, 2010) to re-examine my attempt to do research differently due to the essentializing dominant discourses that proliferate in practice and research. In this article, I explore my own efforts, as a social work practitioner and budding researcher, to engage in research that aimed at destabilizing dominant discourses of homeless youth and privileging homeless youths' diverse articulations of risk in their day-to-day lives. Specifically, I describe my lack of insight related to positionality and subjectivity and to asymetrical power dynamics. As lessons for future researchers, I propose ways in which engaging in a reflexive project could have been better reflected upon and negotiated. I argue that bridging subjectivity, situated ethics, and anti-oppressive research practices may provide meaningful ways to bridge these gaps.

This article reflects on the methodological approach and ethical challenges faced in conducting a longitudinal ethnography with homeless youth (16 and 17 years old) to dislocate prevailing conceptualizations of homeless youth that tend to oscillate between depictions of vulnerability and delinquency. Utilizing ethnographic methods, this doctoral research attempted to build relationships with participants and follow them over an extended period of time, one to four years, to capture the ontological complexity of their experiences. The use of participant observation and informal interviewing techniques offered an original point of departure. It aimed to produce knowledge that stemmed from participants' situated and evolving experiences, a recognition that this much marginalized group (Benoit, Jansson, & Anderson, 2007) are active social actors and are capable of a host of things, including experiencing joy and resisting various forms of domination—elements that are too frequently absent in established discourses. Building relationships with youths was precisely the way to gain in-depth knowledge of their understandings, document their experiences and interpretations—to resist reductionism in dominant discourses. This longitudinal approach hoped to capture the essence of experiences as they were unfolding. Indeed, it was a purposeful attempt to contest traditional

research methods that have relied upon static snapshots taken at a single point in time based on researcher's social standpoints that frame the questions being asked and shape the resultant knowledge claims.

The first section of this article explores the impetus that spurred the study, the initial catalyst that emerged from professional practice—a profound sense of injustice regarding the challenges this group faces. This spark became intensified by the overriding belief that risk discourses in research and practice with homeless youth were on the rise—reinforcing the *othering* of homeless youth through the essentialization of their experiences. Bridging these two catalysts provided the necessary passion to pursue a complex and nuanced project which sought to examine in-depth, and over time, the points of view of homeless youth. Thus, this article will provide reflections upon the rise of risk and the impact of dominant conceptualizations of youths as *at risk* and *risky*, followed by the methodological framework of the study. I will examine the tensions involved in conducting research as a practitioner-researcher who retrospectively reflects upon her positionality and subjectivity using a critical lens. Based on my reflections, I suggest a three-pronged approach that addresses subjectivity, situated ethics, and anti-oppressive research practices as a meaningful and constructive avenue to acknowledging and deconstructing the dominant forces at play in research processes.

Impetus

Homeless youth are considered difficult to study because they are unlikely to seek help from emergency services, such as shelters or drop-in centres (Gaetz, 2004, 2009; Karabanow, 2004), which happen to be the settings for most research. Their extensive use of informal social networks (Tyler & Melander, 2011) and "street families"[1] to reduce victimization (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy, Hagan, & Martin, 2002) mean that they remain a largely under-studied group (Bradley, 1997; Kraus, Eberle, & Serge, 2001; Marshall et al., 2008). There is a dearth of knowledge and, more particularly, longitudinal situated knowledge about the subjective experiences of homeless youth (Aubry, 2008; Aubry, Klodawsky, Nemiroff, Birnie, & Bonetta, 2007; Benoit et al., 2007; Kidd, 2006; Tyler, 2008). This study sought to redress this void by engaging with youths over a substantial period of time.

Rooted in practice knowledge, the purposive sampling of 16- and 17-year-old youths was a deliberate choice to highlight an unjust risk paradox of sorts. Not only is this group more marginalized because of structural and symbolic constraints that push them into more *risky* arenas of limited choices, but they are considered more *at risk* due to their young age and marginalized social status. In a sense they are doubly disqualified: Not only are they young, but they are homeless, reinforcing the

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[1] According to Hagan and McCarthy, "street families tend to form around issues of survival and support, and individuals within these groups often assume specialized roles that frequently are identified in family terms, including references to street brothers and sisters" (1997: 177). Similarly, "youth friendships can augment or replace the intimacy, support, and other resources characteristically provided by families" (McCarthy et al., 2002: 831).

view that they are illigitemate social actors. In the general public's mind's eye, they are different, deficient, or dangerous. The major contribution of this doctoral research   was to offer a more complex understanding of homeless youths' experiences of everyday life by collaborating with them as actors rather than as subjects and by opposing discourses that reinforce notions of powerlessness and otherness. However, in hindsight I realize and will discuss further how wanting to oppose certain discourses did not necessarily mean that I knew enough about how not to get wrapped up in othering these youths, despite my comprehension of their experiences being broader and more nuanced. Indeed, what I projected as a profoundly "ethical stance," was precisely because I was in a privileged and powerful position to take such a position and shape the research according to this frame of reference.

Snapshot of Homeless Youth

While youth homelessness is not a new phenomenon, it has become more intractable in Canada over the past two decades (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013). There are roughly a quarter of a million absolutely homeless in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2013), and estimates indicate that youth comprise 20% of the homeless population (Gaetz et al., 2013). These youths are overwhelmingly male, with females comprising an estimated 37% of the population, resulting in a ratio of 2:1, male to female (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). The vast majority of youths were born in Canada, with less than 10% born outside the country. Ethnically, 60% are Caucasian, one-third Aboriginal (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Vaillancourt, 1999, p. 6), and about 12% reported being of African, Asian, Middle Eastern descent or other ethnicities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006, p. 8). There is also evidence to suggest that a high proportion of the population self-identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, with estimates ranging between 20% and 40%, and that conflict around sexual orientation and gender identity has been cited as a reason for leaving or being expelled from their home (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz et al., 1999). The mean age at which youths left home was 15 years old, with panhandlers and those in the sex trade being the group who left home at the earliest age (13.5 years old; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002, p. 443).

Most research on homeless youth has indicated they experienced childhoods rife with abuse, neglect, and abandonment that set them on a negative developmental course that in turn pushes and pulls them to the streets (Baron, 2003a, 2003b; Cauce et al., 2000; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow, Clement, Carson & Crane, 2005; Kurtz, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 1991; Mounier & Andujo, 2003; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Moreover, poor parent–child relationships and parenting practices (see DiPaolo, 1999; Stefanidis, Pennbridge, MacKenzie, & Pottharst, 1992; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990), along with family breakdown, instability, and recomposition (Bearsley-Smith, Bond, Littlefield, & Thomas, 2008; Bellot, 2001; Laird, 2007), manifest and place these youths at increased risk for homelessness, further victimization, and engagement in deviant activities (Baron,

Forde, & Kennedy, 2007; Reid, 2011; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Some critics suggest these early experiences of family or institutional life create perfect "training grounds" for anti-social behaviours, in which criminal and violent behaviour is glorified (Baron et al., 2007; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). Moreover, the incidences of victimization, violence, sexual exploitation, and drug use abound in the literature on homeless youth (Boivin, Roy, Haley & Galbaud du Fort, 2005; Cauce et al., 2000; Gaetz, 2004; Hwang, 2000; Roy, Haley, Boivin, Frappier, & Claessens, 1996).

Discussions touching upon homeless youth living on the streets conjure images of risk: The streets evoke fear, danger, victimization, and deviance. Such a culture of fear in relation to risk affects how homeless youth are understood and depicted. It magnifies perceptions of youths' vulnerability and fragility due to their young age and their marginalized social status. Moreover, it tends to homogenize and reduce their experiences, notably from researchers' social standpoints, which are reproduced in dominant discourses that situate their experiences along a binary of victimization and delinquency. These constructions tend to reduce and simplify youths experiences without an underlying analysis of race, class, and gender; contextual, intersectional, and subjective analyses are sorely lacking. The youth-at-risk field has become a burgeoning area of research that tends to oscillate between experiences of victimization (assault, exploitation) and deviance (criminality, violence), suggesting that these youths are different or deficient and require intervention either through protection or surveillance (Bellot, 2001; Sharland, 2006).

Conceptualizations of Homeless Youth as At Risk and Risky

Homeless youth epitomize the essence of being at risk, of being in danger. Sharland argued, "young people … are seen both as a treasured resource and as endangered and dangerous—at risk from others, to themselves, and to the fabric of communities" (2006, p. 247). This is evidenced by a generalized anxiety toward youth based on categorizations of youth unemployment, youth homelessness, youth suicides, delinquency, and drug addiction (Bessant, 2001, p. 32). According to Furedi (2006), fear has become a free-floating phenomenon that has pervaded the cultural fabric of Western society. Furedi (2006) added that every conceivable threat has been transformed into a risk to be managed. "To be at risk is no longer only about what you do, or the probability of some hazard impacting on your life—it is also about who you are. It becomes a fixed attribute of the individual" (Furedi, 2006, p. 5). When risk has been examined with youth, it is often within a narrow definition of danger and fear. Moreover, there is an assumption that youth perceive and respond to situations in a similar normative fashion rooted in a *homo prudens* (rational actor) approach (Kemshall, 2010) that constructs individuals as atomized, self-interested, and calculating actors. However, risk epistemologies are inevitably mediated through social, cultural, and political frameworks of understanding and motivations. Tulloch and Lupton (2003) argued that:

> Rather than drawing a distinction between "rational" and "irrational" (or "accurate" and "biased") risk assessments, we prefer to concentrate on the

meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings operate as part of people's notions of subjectivity and their social relations. (p. 12)

There is now an overemphasis on identification and assessment of risk in terms of defining populations as dangerous, polluting, "risky," and deviant and on rendering populations self-regulating in managing their health and the consequences of their behaviours (Foucault, 1978). Giddens (1991) attested that expert knowledges have been instrumental in fuelling the concept of "risk society" and in mediating discourses on risk.

For instance, the emphasis on health problems of homeless youth (e.g., substance use, unprotected sex, etc.) assumes their blatant disregard for their own health. It has the effect of casting blame onto youth for their own victimization through their assumed rejection of self-regulating practices (e.g., not using condoms and contracting STIs or becoming pregnant) and downplays structural causes that may be at play (e.g., access to resources are often limited). Framing risk discourses in a neutral and apolitical manner gives the illusion of fact-based evidence that cannot be countered, thus the "expert knows best" approach is reinforced. There is an assumption that choices in regard to risk are innocuous or somehow relatively neutral, but in fact they are highly subjective concepts that are loaded with interpretations and judgements concerning choice, responsibility (i.e., conformity), and blame (i.e., morality; Bessant, 2001). We rarely question how risks are defined nor critically examine the political motivations behind which risks are selected and promoted, and which ones are ignored. There exists a tension between the *objective* dangers that are promoted as pervasive and the need to create good subjects who take appropriate preventative measures to regulate and safeguard against danger (Foucault, 1978); and the under-reported *subjective* experiences and understandings of risk, danger, and opportunity that are based on intuition, culture, context, social location, and personal history (Lupton, 1999a, 1999b). The demonization of risk provides a moral compass in regulating behaviours that are deemed "risky," "dangerous," and "polluting" (Douglas, 1985). While mainstream expert discourses have labelled the streets as dangerous and risky and a place that is not safe for youths to congregate,[2] others have postulated that the streets are also highly symbolic spaces of danger and excitement (Bellot, 2001; Colombo, 2008; Parazelli, 2002). Alternative conceptualizations of the streets as sites of experimentation and self-discovery because of the risks that they represent move beyond essentializing youth experiences into a victimization–deviance binary. This unconventional view invites youth perspectives about their own worlds, and certainly resonated with many of the participants in this doctoral study.

The proliferation of risk is pervasive in discourses encompassing this population. Homeless youths' heightened vulnerability to victimization due to their young age and their childhood histories, the potential for exposure and engagement in deviant and illegal activities (e.g., prostitution, drugs, violence, etc.), underpinned by the risk factors that led them to the streets (abuse, neglect), combine together to

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[2] as explored and outlined in the introduction.

form a powerful risk leitmotif. This sociology of risk dilutes complex experiences and yet serves as the basis for conceptual categories for expert discourse and scholarship. According to Kelly, "a historically novel aspect of the truth of youth-at-risk is that, potentially, every behaviour, every practice, every group of young people can be constructed in terms of risk" (2000, p. 463). Moreover, he argued that this is an attempt to "regulate youthful identities" through interventions that attempt to regulate and normalize behaviours (Kelly, 2000, p. 465). The absence of input and collaboration from youths about their experiences and from their standpoint renders risk frameworks partial at best. While risk is pervasive in discourses encompassing this population, the intangibility of risk necessarily means that all knowledge is contestable and dependent upon interpretation (Adam & van Loon, 2000; Ewald, 1991). The methodological choices implicit in this study were a deliberate attempt to move beyond linear representations of youth and deterministic findings of otherness and to access a broader interpretation of homeless youths' experiences by attempting to engage in a different form of research.

To date, most knowledge about homeless youth has suffered from a double bind that limits analysis. While youths' experiences are little known due to methodological constraints (based on single-point-in-time data and positivist orientations), theories of risk have not done justice to subjective experiences of risk. Notably, understandings of risk have operated within a limited scope of danger and fear. Risk in the context of this doctoral research embraced broad notions of risk, harkening back to an earlier time when notions of risk embodied *taking chances* (Bernstein, 1996; Fox, 1999) rather than contemporary meanings of potential harm (Lupton, 1999a, 1999b). This alternative conceptualization views risk as neither good nor bad and invites the complexity of youth perspectives. This broader conceptualization of risk was chosen as it seemed to reflect, empirically, the multiple realities with which youths viewed risk on the streets. While grand social theories of risk (Beck, 1992, 1995, 1996; Douglas, 1969, 1985, 1992; Foucault, 1991) tend to explain risk from a macro-sociological perspective, they have difficulty describing peoples' individual experiences in negotiating risk (Lupton, 1999a). This study attempted to reverse this paradigm by examining risk from interactional, temporal, and situated points of view, and in my view, emanated from a more ethical stance promoting participation (however, it will be argued later that this participation was shaped by my own subjectivity as a practitioner-researcher); as homeless youth as a category tend to be seen as powerless and are frequently in situations ripe for unethical research practices. The following section elucidates the methodological choices that were the springboard for better understanding risk from youths' points of view and, it was hoped, in a more ethical manner.

Methodological Framework

A longitudinal and situated approach was chosen to counter reductionist and linear interpretations of youths' experiences. Youths' understandings of street life are constructed, de-constructed, and re-constructed over time in light of new experiences; they cannot be captured in an interview setting, and this would deny

their interactional and dynamic nature. Rapport and trust were essential to gain access to this form of knowledge, which could only be leveraged through building relationships with participants. Tara's story, presented at this beginning of this article, exemplifies this point. She risked telling me the truth about her drug use and trusted that I would not divulge this information to the drop-in where she worked as a peer support worker. She took a risk in confiding in me her story and disclosing her realities and her interpretations of the risks she faced. My regular presence in youths' spaces (in agencies and on the streets with youths) most likely encouraged this trust. Building relationships meant being present on a regular basis in the community where homeless youth congregated, in and outside agencies they frequented, and proving that I could be trusted. It also meant making myself available on a moment's notice to discuss a topic of concern, go for a quick coffee, or "tag along" for a walk if I was invited. Being present and genuinely interested in what they had to share fostered closeness, trust, and lay the foundations for our relationships. Later on in the research, it also meant staying in contact by other methods (telephone, email) and involved sometimes seeing youths in new milieus—such as their first apartments, after hitchhiking trips, or as first-time parents, etc.

As a social worker, I had traditionally occupied a dominant space in which I was invested with a certain amount of authority. As a budding researcher engaged in ethnography, however, I was only partially in control of the process. Unmapping the social work space I had typically occupied with homeless youth meant doing away with the comforts and contours of clinical practice and being invited into their space. As the study unfolded, I became aware that my years of clinical experience documenting and evaluating histories of childhood and adolescent victimization, interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges, mental health and addiction problems, and so forth, had supplied me with a particular victimization lens based on expert frameworks of which I was not conscious until I engaged with youths in a different way. This shift in perspective arose because my focus had changed and, with it, my role. Rather than essentializing their experiences into clinical categories, meanings, and actions, I needed each youth's permission to observe and interact in their world, in the role of observer-learner (in hindsight still invested with a certain amount of authority). I wanted to destabilize the traditional power hierarchy of knowledge production and assume a new role as learner. I wanted to experience phenomena alongside participants—differently, of course, due to my social location and subjectivity (which will be discussed later)—through a wider lens and with greater curiosity. This was a refreshing and liberating experience. Most importantly, it allowed me to connect with youth differently and to consider their experiences, and how decisions were shaped, in a different light, albeit taken up and interpreted by my power/knowledge framework. In Tara's case it meant understanding the multiple layers involved in the risks she took and viewing her drug use as an important relationship and orientating feauture, which juxtaposed the degree of power that institutions and the streets had over her options with the ways in which she navigated these oppressive forces.

For instance, instead of framing youths' experiences through a victim lens, I started to understand the others ways in which they framed their experiences. Many youths did not characterize their experiences as ones of victimization or deviance. Instead, many youths equated harmful experiences as character-shaping. Some described themselves as "warriors," or as "survivors, or as "hustlers"; describing themselves as actors who were resourceful and creative, and who were not necessarily passive but actively practised resistance to those who tried to exert authority over them (e.g., police, other youths, helping professionals, etc.). Instead of the common stereotype that pervades adolescent literature that views youths as impulsive, rebellious, and cognitively stunted, this study found that youths were thoughtful about their lives, their identities, and their relationships with others. In Tara's case, she was thoughtful about the risks she perceived as a young woman who was an injection drug user. She explained that it was diffuicult to acquire the drugs she needed because she was dependent on drug dealers who were sexual predators, known for trading drugs for sex. Alternatively, some dealers would not sell to her because they felt she was too young and needed to be protected. Thus, she became dependent on her boyfriend to acquire the drugs she needed to remain at a maintenance level of use (and not suffer health problems due to withdrawal symptoms). Additionally, the risks of her employer discovering her drug use and of her losing a source of income that "maintained" her "wellness," were the greatest risks from her perspective. However, these layers of risk perception from her standpoint are explanations that are not easily captured with traditional research methods. Offering a broad scope of interpretation enables a dialectical, discursive, and complex understanding of human phenomena from a certain standpoint and does not fit neatly into preordained categories (whether established in research or practice). It also demonstrates that there are nuances and layers of possibilities and elucidations, which hinge on social location and perceptions.

Youths' risk frameworks were also extremely malleable and shifted over time, based on the accumulation of new experiences that also served to shape and reshape the construction of their identities. One of the most interesting findings of the study was that street life opportunities were conceptualized as active risk taking by more than half of the participants. Taking chances and embarking on new adventures, experimenting with the different opportunities street life presents (experimenting with new drugs, new relationships, travelling, squatting, etc.), was a rationale provided by more than half the group for being drawn to the streets. These youths indicated that they felt they had more control over their lives and, ultimately, power over choices on the streets than in their previous lives. Many also expressed feelings of alienation, solitude, boredom, and constraint that triggered their departure to the streets and experimentation.

As a social worker on a community outreach team serving homeless youth for almost a decade, I was well integrated within the community and thus able to recruit participants who would have been difficult to meet otherwise. I continued to work in the field and conduct my research simultaneously. Thus when I was "hanging out" in various agencies that served people who are homeless, or just outside of these

establishments, I would come into contact with potential participants or be introduced to them by current participants and be able to present my research topic to determine interest and willingness. My aim was to "follow" a minimum of fifteen 16- and 17-year-olds in Ottawa, Canada, who were living on their own (legally emancipated) and who could be categorized as homeless youth or street youth (referring to a more street-entrenched lifestyle), or both, as these are not mutually exclusive terms. Participants were all 16 or 17 years old at the time of recruitment and were recruited from four agencies serving homeless youth in Ottawa, Canada, or through word of mouth among homeless youth (snowball method). The participation criteria for the project were thus as follows: 16 or 17 years old at the beginning of the study; emancipated (legally independent and not requiring parental consent to partake in the study); homeless (staying in shelters, "couch-surfing," sleeping "rough," or marginally housed); willing to allow the researcher to observe, speak, and remain in contact with them over the research period; and English and/or French speaking. Data collection began in December 2006 and continued until early 2010. The initial recruitment of participants took place in four agencies that serve homeless youth in Ottawa, Canada. In all, 18 youths participated in the study, 12 female and 6 male. Participants were mostly from the Ottawa area or surrounding regions. Approximately half of the participants had been raised in group homes, foster families, extended families, or were leaving youth detention centres, with most of these cycling through a mélange of substitute care arrangements. Ten youths entered street life directly from their families of origin and were not leaving a substitute care arrangement. All participants experienced residential instability, with most living on the streets or in emergency shelters.

Based on years of social work practice with homeless youth before embarking on the project, one of the study's raisons d'être was clearly ethically motivated—directly related to the unjustness I perceived; notably, the gravity of structural constraints (difficulty accessing social assistance, housing, and labour markets) impinging on this younger cohort that I felt pushed them into arenas of limited options (MacDonald, 2013). I believe these structural obstacles made it more difficult for this group to eke out a living in socially legitimate ways and had the effect of pulling them into activities deemed more dangerous or marginal. In the province of Ontario, Canada, the simple act of 16- or 17-year-olds leaving "home" ultimately determines their legal autonomy. There are no legislative provisions that allow a youth to become emancipated, creating a significant equality rights issue. These youths are not required to submit to parental control, and yet they have not reached the age of majority and are subsequently denied legislated adult benefits. Emancipated youths are in a kind of no-status limbo where resources (e.g., housing, social assistance) are often paltry and difficult to access. Despite their designation as a more vulnerable group, the way the "system" is set up (e.g., social assistance, supportive and/or transitional housing, limited shelter options) often poses enormous challenges for homeless youth. The major contribution of this study was to offer a wider and more complex understanding of homeless youths' risk frameworks in their everyday lives.

Some youths were seen regularly, on at least a weekly basis, if not several times a week, while others were seen only a couple of times over the study's period. Interactions ranged from one to two hours of observation, listening and asking questions (one on one), to chats on the streets in groups about where they were going, what they were doing, who they were "hanging out" with. Email and telephone correspondence with several youths also occurred. Eight youths were followed intensively over this period, and five were followed with telephone conversations, email correspondence, and field encounters. The epistemological standpoint of this study meant that conceptualizations of risk sprung from the way in which participants understood risk in their everyday lives, how they described their experiences. The streets represent paradoxes of danger and excitement, captivity and liberty, etc. It captured their dynamic and multiple constructions of risk as they pertained to hazards and opportunities comprised in street life, as I understood them.

Positionality and Subjectivity: Unanswered Questions

Reflecting on this doctoral research through the critical lens that is offered by Heron (2005) and Rossiter (2005) brings into focus the panoply of issues—notably related to power—that were not identified, reflected upon, or explored sufficiently during the course of the study. Specifically, my own positionality and subjectivity as a practitioner-researcher were under-problematized. Positionality refers to a "concept that gender, race, class and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities" (Maher & Tetreault, 1993, p. 118). I remember, at the beginning of the project, being quite concerned about relations of power, being quite sensitive in general to issues of oppression, misrepresentation, and injustice, which for me represented the catalysts of the research. I desired to combat and contest reductionistic understandings of lived experiences precisely because I felt it was unjust and did disservice to youths' multiple realities; the dialogical understanding of the constraints and contradictions they faced was not well understood or explained in scholarship nor in practice. Due to my own jitters and trepidation about starting the project I became quite concerned about how I would manage my twin roles as social worker and researcher in the community. In essence, how would I, as a social worker-researcher, wearing my two hats of privilege and power, not obscure the problems of power and privilege so frequent in interactions in social work relationships between helper and helped, and reproduce them in my research relationships?

According to Heron,

individuals take up or identify with particular subject positions structured through relations of power and made available through different discourses.… The constitution of individual subjectivity through discourses is part of a wider network of power relations in which persons are being postioned at any given point, and these discourses may contradict one another. Subjectivity is, thus, unavoidably multiple and contradictory. (2005, p. 347)

This complexity is particularly layered in the context of this study as professional roles were multiple and interlocking, and also contained within them several "mutually constitutive and constantly interactive" discourses. Dominant discourses—empirically and theoretically, epistemologically and ontologically—in social work, mental health, scholarship, and practice, were all encompassing and intricately layered. Rossiter stated that: "social work is a nodal point where history, culture and individual meet with an imperative for action. Given the mandate of working with marginalized people, this particular nexus is a place of crushing ambivalence" (2005, p. 1). Rossiter (2005, p. 2) cited:

> When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of the experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside (Scott, 1992, p. 5).

Inspired by Rossiter's work to develop ways to make social work truly critical, retrospectively I might ask myself: How do I contest, deconstruct the knowledge claims that I have made from the research in which my well-intentioned innocence as a researcher has been to "accurately" capture the participant's points of view? How do I contest, deconstruct, and understand the constructed nature of experience itself? How do I expose the contradictions inherent in the multiple subjectivities situated in the research? How do I recontextualize risk in the context of youths' everyday lives and their points of view without focusing on the sensational, without referring to my frame of reference?

My research objectives were broad but still circumscribed, delimited by my scientific and empirical knowledge of risk and of what I felt was profoundly absent and unjust in dominant discourses. Thus the objectives were in stark contrast to what I perceived and understood to be dominant constructions of *risky* and *at-risk* discourses in the research on homeless youth.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. unearth youths' lived reality as they related to choices they made concerning risk (conceived as danger and opportunity that I observed in my practice work), framed in their voices and understanding as experiences unfolded over a period of time (one to two years);

2. uncover the context and meaning participants assign to their experiences, and to restrict as much as possible a superimposing of preconceptions in relation to risk, victimization, and deviance;

3. understand how participants perceive, negotiate, and respond (strategies employed) to risks, and how conceptualizations of risk and practices or strategies change over time;

4. uncover participant's personal constructions of risk as they relate to the construction of their evolving identities; and

5. expose participants' understanding of risk as it relates to responsibilization, self-regulation, and their interactions and responses to expert systems and normative institutions.

However, I did not problematize how I myself had been shaped by normative and authoritative institutions (academia and psychiatry); nor how, in my desire to render participants "active subjects," I may have been further reinforcing relations of power. In relation to the notion of empowering participants and making capable subjects in economically disadvantaged countries, Triantafillou and Nielsen stated:

> the more the subject participates actively in taking charge of herself to promote the well-being of herself and her family—the more profoundly she is enmeshed in relations of power … it is because effective empowerment and increased room for choice are entirely dependent upon particular knowledges, techniques and procedures for constituting the active subject—and these are feasible only through their investment in particular relations of power (2001, p. 65).

My desire to engage participants in the research created perhaps a certain portrait of what an ideal candidate ressembled, and was certainly a fantasy in which I was not necessarily attuned to the political dimensions of participation and oppression. For instance, it was much easier to engage the raconteurs, a friendly face, someone who easily shared information and allowed me to accompany them—in sum, an "easy" participant. According to Quaghebeur, Masschelein, and Nguyen, "taking participants seriously, giving them a voice, is never completely neutral, but always also indicates boundaries—designed by the participatory process—delimiting and determining the voice that can be uttered" (2004, p. 160). These decisions, choices that are made to decide "who" participates, "how" and "when" they participate, was certainly in my hands as the researcher who, because of the power/knowledge/self nexus, determines the conditions of participation and the knowledge produced. Participation is very much a cultural concept, in that participation is "always also exercising power and evolves from or becomes implemented because of a certain exercise of power" (Quaghebeur et al., 2004, p. 161), thus it is always an "operation of power, governing people to behave or to govern themselves in a particular determined way" (p. 162). It is true that this study offered participants a certain kind of way to behave, circumscribed to some degree the roles they were offered to play, and did not necessarily take into consideration oppressive forces that may have affected a youth's ability to participate.

Earlier in the research, I had difficulty trying to keep the focus on meanings of risk and not jumping to interpretations. I logged: "It's me defining what risks they face again … Is this the correct way to go about it? … How do I differentiate between my analysis and participants—am I recreating the cycle of research that's

already been done? Am I reproducing a cycle of oppression?"[3] I had to learn how not to jump into an interpretive stance but instead to observe events, listen to stories, witness interactions, but almost in a sterile sense in which I did not truly consider the impact of my own presence, appreciated what I might have represented to participants, what kinds of dominant forces were at play. I worked hard to remember bits of phrases that youths evoked to capture their understanding and would scribble them down as soon as I was alone, truly hoping I would do justice to their interpretations of their experiences, and paint an "accurate portrayal."

At the beginning of the project I consulted a director of a youth shelter whom I admired and asked her advice about how to broach the subject of research with potential participants when I was already a well known figure in the community (bearing in mind, it is not an especially large community). Her reply: "You know, these young people are able to understand that you can wear two hats at the same time, that you can be both a social worker and a researcher, you just need to be clear about when you are doing what." Though I took her advice to heart—that the complexity of this endeavour would be appreciated by prospective participants—I was not so sure myself. I now realize that I did not sufficiently reflect upon, and take into consideration, my own positionality and subjectivities and how they affected the project and its outcomes. For instance, I did not fully take into account how my gender, class, ethnicity, and affiliation with (and molding by) a certain authoritative dominant psychiatric or academic institution—nor my outward presence (such as pregnancy)—may have affected the research and who was recruited for the study, nor how it shaped knowledge claims.

Taking up Heron's (2005) concern that we are frequently much more concerned by social location than subjectivity, and reflecting upon my doctoral study, the piece that comes up short is that I did not properly problematize and deconstruct the impact of my subjectivities and the inherent power relations. For instance, while I was able to name and reflect upon my own privileged status and consider the effect it had on shaping the findings that emerged, the aspect of "conferred dominance" (Heron, 2005, p. 344)—which certainly shaped the kinds of questions that were asked, the way in which they were asked, and the resultant knowledge claims—was underexplored. Indeed, the dominant power/knowledge nexus that is incarnated by one's association to, and molding by, an authoritative (psychiatric) institution that provides services (or withholds them), was not well problematized or understood. The impact of my particular social representation as a mental health social worker might have insidiously encouraged a "forced" or "strongly encouraged" push to participate in the research. There are also layers to these forms of conferred dominance; some of my strongest supporters were the very front-line workers in the agencies I served who may have strongly encouraged participants to participate in the study. This nexus that is a "capillary form of power" (Foucault, 1980), in which the "power reaches into the very grain of individuals …

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[3] Research log, February 13, 2008.

and inserts inself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39)—was not given sufficient consideration.

This under-problematization leads to several unanswered questions, such as: What kinds of positions of power did I reflect to youths as a social worker-researcher? How was my power as a social worker and a researcher at play? How could these varying "capillaries of power" be explored and taken into consideration in our relationships? How could they be unmasked and manipulated (so as not to harm or contaminate viewpoints—if possible)? How did this hinder, hamper, or help with recruiting participants and maintaining contact? How did youths resist or make sense of dominance in the context of the project? How might I not reproduce dominant ways of conducting research when I am the one leading it and invested in its outcome? How did I negotiate my different roles with participants and how were they negotiating them with me? How did other workers connected to my project push or encourage participation? How might I honour and capture youths' points of view when I am in control of what will be produced? Were practices of resistance present in my research and how might I acknowledge them?

Due to the marginalization this group faces, I emphasized with participants my respect for their space and privacy, that they were the gatekeepers of participation and, hence, of knowledge production. However, I was in the privileged position to decide that this was how participation should be negotiated and unaware to the ways in which their participation may have been hindered or hampered by institutional forces (or other oppressive forces; for instance, youths often named their peers as their main oppressors). I naively assumed I could relinquish ideas of power and control by recognizing and emphasizing with them that their engagement was fluid, contingent upon what I perceived to be a youth's desire to participate or not, which could wax and wane from one moment to the next—insidiously, I was burdening them with the "capable" subject role.

According to Renold, Holland, Ross, and Hillman, "for some children and young people who are looked-after, their own histories and relationships to participatory discourses and practices will shape their level of engagement with and expectation of the research project and research team (from enthusiasm to cynicism)" (2008, p. 432). Indeed, the impact of relationship building was significant to this study, particularly as it pertained to gendered dimensions of the knowledge footprint. This study attracted significantly more female participants than male (12 females to 6 males). Thus, experiences emanating from the study are more explicative of young women's experiences than men's (e.g., risk of pregnancy, forms of sexual exploitation—this is not to say that young men do not experience these, but that these are more commonly associated with young women). Significantly, higher participation by young women could have occurred for various reasons. The relationship-building nature of the study might have appealed more to young women (perhaps a stereotype?); the fact that I am a woman and was pregnant could have appealed more to young women, as pregnancy was a common starting point of conversation, and might have had the opposite effect on young men, making them uncomfortable to participate. The relationship-building ethos of this study provided a

methodological paradox. The nature of the study attracted youths who appeared to be more comfortable talking about their experiences, that were raconteurs and enjoyed relaying their stories in a way sometimes to relive the excitement of events. In effect, they were relatively easy to establish rapport with and were more comfortable allowing me to infiltrate their social spaces. It appealed to youths who were more extroverted and had the ability to talk about their experiences, who were more enthusiastic about the study, and who were, frankly—and am embarrassed to admit— "easier" to collaborate with. For the participants who were more introverted, quiet, and private, perhaps even resistant to participating, gaining access and collecting data did prove more difficult, as it took longer to build rapport; thus the results are skewed toward the experiences of this former majority group. But the point of this deconstruction is also to demonstrate that I was in the project of making "capable" subjects, active participants, and unwittingly was caught up in empowerment and activation logics (Pollack, 2010).

Regretfully, I wish I had possessed a greater understanding of how my gender, class, and ethnicity affected my research relationships with youths and how this shaped engagement (or disengagement) with the project. I wish I had understood how my own forms of subjectivity "which are imposed on us, and which we impose on ourselves, through a range of power/knowledge/self practices" (O'Leary, 2002, p. 108), may have impacted participation, the knowledge created, and my own way of seeing and creating *ideal subjects.*

Attempting to do Research Differently, Crtitically

Critical social work research frameworks require us to situate ourselves, our beliefs, our social constructs in the research process. This can be a difficult and painful commitment—making oneself vulnerable and open to scrutiny. This oath means we must take risks, widening the focus of the "subjects" of our research to include ourselves, our subjectivities, our histories, and implications in maintaining and reproducing oppression. For this to occur, we must unpack our own ideological leanings and expose frameworks of privilege and oppression, and the ways in which the dominant ways of knowing infiltrate our own conceptualizations and the knowledge produced. We must lean into the discomfort of being exposed and called out on our assumptions, prejudices, and the asymetrical power relationships we benefit from, with clients and participants.

Despite being a social worker who prided myself on focussing on strengths and resiliency (a definite empowerment perspective), I felt overwhelmed by the oppressive structures and obstacles youths faced in their everyday lives. I was angered by the unsatisfactory options available to better youths' lives, the clear lack of creative responses to their needs. Fieldwork allowed me to appreciate and consider the ways in which youths creatively "get by," despite the very real omnipresence of oppressive structures, which I understood as outside of myself. The focus for many participants, however, was not necessarily on the injustice of their situation, but on how we experience life, find some joy, have some measure of control and power over our lives. Being in a learner position, I needed to

combat my own oversimplified and reductionistic thinking. One of the tools associated with loosening authoritative stances is the use of substantive feedback (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 74). I deliberately sought feedback from participants regarding the themes that emerged to clarify concepts, experiences, and understandings. The starting point of our interactions was also directed by the youths themselves, based on what was important to them in that moment of time. Not directing the topic of interview or observation allowed for a more natural flow of situated experience and loosened the control over the research goals and relationship. Similarly the research of Acker et al. (1983) as cited in Shaw (2003, p. 19) attempted similar strategies to "reduce the unequal power and acknowledge the subjectivity of the participants," including encouraging participants to "take the lead in deciding what to talk about." By utilizing substantive feedback, participants assumed the role of raconteur in relation to risk discourses, thus encouraging a re-positioning and a re-powering in the production of knowledge. The outcome I desired—to incorporate participant feeback and have youth clarify concepts to the degree that I would have liked—did not entirely happen. While every effort was made to highlight youth voices, the difficulties of engaging this population and remaining in contact over the course of one to four years was challenging at best. The realities of street life and the constraints on my own personal life did not allow for the insertion I would have liked. Of course, the use of substantive feedback could never and will never be enough to neutralize power dynamics, even if this were possible—just as all research is not value or judgement free. But it was one attempt to validate with youths whether I was capturing their point of view about what was important to them.

My intentions of collaboration and power-sharing in an attempt to rectify the often oppressive processes of research, particularly in relation to highly stigmatized groups, did not happen nearly to the degree that I would have liked. Eisner (1991, p. 225–226) stated: "We do not like to think of ourselves as using others as a means to our own professional ends, but if we embark upon a research study that we conceptualize, direct, and write, we virtually assure that we will use others for our purpose." Unfortunately, Eisner's argument holds great merit despite efforts to address this imbalance. I was the one with the power in deciding what constituted knowledge and how it might be shared. What I chose to report, highlight, and display was still a subjective choice based on my interpretation that is filtered through my values and assumptions and the knowledge/power nexus that is situated in a white, middle class, higher-education context and shaped by years of practice for a dominant institution. I tried to ensure "accurate" interpretations with youths by verifying the content of previous interactions, but in some cases this was not always possible due to our spotty contact. Furthermore, my expectation that the study take on more of a political bent or that the youths have more ownership over the project was unrealistic, because the goals of the project were created and established by myself and not hatched by the youths themselves. They were relaying their experiences, but I was still the one asking the questions and shaping the responses and, in so doing, requiring a certain kind of participation and active subject.

Bridging Situated Ethics and Anti-oppressive Practices

Self-determination and respect for the inherent dignity of the person, and I would add, of *collectivities*, are core values of social work practice and research (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Cowden, 2012) and form the bedrock of its social-justice orientation and anti-oppressive practices. According to Banks (2008), there has been a steady increase in interest in social work ethics, including the development and use of decision-making models found in numerous textbooks, "which inevitably contributes to the kind of discourse about social work ethics" (p. 1241). She describes the growing interest and published accounts of tackling ethical issues in social work day-to-day practice ("descriptive" or "empirical" ethics). In contrast, can be found "meta-ethics" (tied to constructs of rights, responsibilities, and professional integrity). Lastly, normative ethics instruct on rules and actions that should be undertaken in relation to ethical principles. These all speak to a form of universality or applicability but do not necessarily deconstruct the inherent power structures, positionalities, and subjectivities insidious in social work practice and research, nor examine how they shape the production of knowledge and subsequent knowledge claims. Guidelines and rules-based practice should not replace the need for discourse on ethical practice (Witken, 2000), nor do they necessarily correspond well to the overly complex and murky situations that emerge in field research, moreover in practitioner-researcher dynamics. They are relatively silent about the power/knowledge/self nexus and reproduction of dominant structures. A challenge to these paradigms, according to Banks, has come from

> virtue ethics (focusing on qualities of character), the development of an ethics of care (focusing on caring relationships), communitarian ethics (focusing on community, responsibility and co-operation) and pluralist, discursive, postmodern or anti-theory approaches to ethics. (2008, p. 1243)

The retrospectivity of this article takes up Bank's call to develop a more "embedded and situated approach to ethics in professional life" (2008, p. 1238) that pays attention to the situated nature of values and conduct, and confronts universally abstract principles that rest on an individual freedom framework (p. 1243). This article highlights the need to bridge these new situated ethical practices with anti-oppressive perspectives of resistance and reconstruction that provide adequate distance from the individualized ethical dilemmas, and to connect the individual to the social, political, and economic contexts from within which, where, and with whom the research takes place.

According to Potts and Brown, anti-oppressive research asks us to accept ambivalence and uncertainty, enabling us to

> question that which appears "normal" and taken for granted to (re)negotiate processes and create spaces for ourselves and others who are commonly excluded from the creation of knowledge … to reflect upon our sense of self, history, our context(s), and our actions with others. It has highlighted the need for skills in thinking critically, listening carefully, and analyzing relations of power of which we are a part so that we can

identify and unpack assumptions, unearth patterns of thinking and acting, and recognize their effects. (2005, p. 263)

Building on this approach and deepening it with the work of Heron (2005) and Rossiter (2005) on critical reflection and subjectivity and with Banks's (2008) situated ethics could provide a new way to address the underexplored issues and questions arising from this project and future projects like it. For instance, in addition to the questions posed earlier I might ask: What shapes does the research take that mirror or contest dominant discourses? What relations of domination might be re-inscribed by the questions I pose? (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 266). How do we surpass othering practices when designing and conducting research, and not fall prey to the instrumentalization of participants' agency, or to forms of tokenistic empowerment, that depend upon the making of capable subjects? Finally, is the project of engaging in research not precisely setting oneself up in stark contradiction to another population, a form of othering in and of itself? And if so, how does one confront and expose this domination?

Conclusion

Doing research differently is messy and necessitates taking risks. It requires being more attuned to the processes than being fixated on the results, and attempting to destabilize relations of power and widen spaces to other ways of knowing. Turning back to Tara's story, how might one dialogue about her ambivalences and realities of street life and drug use while taking into account her desire to continue using substances and engage in youth work, when she is worried about her employer discovering her continued drug use and losing her source of income? This requires opening up a dialogue, not from a risk framework embedded in normative conceptualizations of safety and harm, but by recognizing the discontinuities, constrained options, and complicated conceptualizations of risk, and by analyzing the interlocking power/knowledge dynamics embedded in her decisions and realities. This involves validating peer and situated knowledges and the varied and irregular forms of regulation and responsibilization. It also means examining our practices and the consequences they have for marginalized youths. If Tara had been upfront about her drug use with service providers, she would most likely have lost an important role and source of revenue as a peer support worker. Policies need to evolve so that they are more creative and reflective of the nuanced choices and opportunities available to marginalized youths. This vantage point has the ability to destabilize (though not neutralize) the asymmetrical power relationships in which social work practice happens with marginalized populations. Taking stock of social work's normative assumptions that guide interventions, by exposing the moral frameworks that govern our ideas around risk and danger, choice and opportunity, responsibility and regulation, helps to destabilize the expert–subject dynamic and invites learning from youths from their perspectives and the intersecting forms of oppression. It also recognizes the contradictions and constrained options youths face, and diminishes the judgemental stance that youths frequently feel subjected to that delegitimizes their experiences. Taking such an approach requires acts of humility, a *not-knowing*

stance and a respect for situated knowledges, and an analysis of power relations. It necessitates an appreciation of the multiple and paradoxical realities and tensions in which these youths' lives unfold, and the contradictory responses to problems that social work practice all too frequently gives. It also requires social workers to question their own subjectivity, as subjects of service provision who are frequently inscribed in relations of power and domination.

A reclaiming of risk as the ability, strength, skill, and ingenuity to take chances emerged from my empirical observations. This risk posture is also ethically driven, juxtaposing dominant discourses that target and essentialize youth experiences. The risks and insights I gained from this doctoral study and its relationship-building ethos—relating to youths in a different way—made me realize the limitations of my own understandings and biases; however, it did not go far enough in exploring the dominant spaces I, too, occupied, nor the ways in which I occupied them as a social worker-researcher. Reflecting upon this naïveté—where issues of power and domination are interlaced but not sufficiently exposed, deconstructed, and articulated—necessitates the construction of new methods. Indeed, it requires the bridging of anti-oppressive research practices, the development of situated ethics and a taking stock of subjectivities to better plan, understand, and negotiate the research process to counter prevailing discourses of "active participation" and "capable subjects" promoted within progressive research models.

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