THE PARADOX OF BEING YOUNG AND HOMELESS: RESILIENCY IN THE FACE OF CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract: The major contribution of this article is to address the lack of knowledge regarding homeless youth's experiences of risk, from their point of view. The youth at-risk field has become a burgeoning area of research that tends to magnify vulnerabilities, yet limits our understanding of complex youth experiences. It is important to highlight another dimension of the homeless youth experience that has rarely been promoted, and that is one of adaptability and creativity encompassed within a framework of survivability and resilience – notions that often necessitate taking risks. Drawing on a longitudinal ethnographic study with 18 homeless youth (aged 16 and 17 years old) in Ottawa (Canada), this article paints a more complex understanding of the struggles youth face, in terms of structural (social assistance, housing) and symbolic (stigma, social representations, and identity constructs) constraints. This analysis adds complexity to youth-at-risk discourses and displays the challenges they encounter and the resilient ways in which they seek to overcome obstacles. This paper supports a movement towards recognizing youth strengths and the heterogeneity of their experiences.

Keywords: homeless youth, risk, constraints, identity, adaptability

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"At-Risk" Youth

Homeless youth are deemed an "at-risk" group because they have been defined as such in several ways. Most research on homeless youth suggests that they have experienced childhoods rife with abuse, neglect, and abandonment, setting them on a negative developmental course that in turn pushes and pulls them to the streets (Baron, 2003; Cauce et al., 2000; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Kurtz, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 1991; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow et al., 2005; Mounier & Andujo, 2003; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Additionally, research shows that 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; Caputo, Weiler, & Anderson, 1997; Jones, 1997; Laird, 2007) place these youth at increased risk for homelessness, further victimization, and engagement in deviant activities (Baron, Forde, & Kennedy, 2007; Reid, 2011; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Some scholars suggest these negative early experiences of family or institutional life create perfect "training grounds" for anti-social behaviours (Baron et al., 2007; Corrado & Freedman, 2011; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997), culminating in a life on the streets and a venue for competing "character contests" (where violence and criminality are encouraged) that play out in youths' efforts to achieve social legitimacy and recognition (Baron et al., 2007).

A systemic issue pertinent to this population is that many arrive on the streets from the child welfare system (Aubry, Klodawsky, Nemiroff, Birnie, & Bonetta, 2007; Fitzgerald, 1995; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow et al., 2005; Kraus, Eberle, & Serge, 2001) or are released from detention centres and have nowhere else to go (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In Ontario, Canada, where this study was conducted, young people have the right to leave their "home" at age 16, and many choose to do so. However, significant gaps that contribute to youth homelessness have been identified in Ontario's child welfare and protection services, especially for 16 and 17 year olds (Kraus et al., 2001). Structural constraints abound for this population: Inadequate social assistance and supportive housing systems, and the changing labour market, make it difficult for this age group to gain access to scarce resources and to eke out a living in socially legitimate ways (Bessant, 2001; Farrell, Aubry, Klodawsky, & Pettey, 2000).

In much of the key literature on youth homelessness, the streets are characterized as intensely dangerous spaces in which these young people congregate. As Hagan and McCarthy (1997) state in their watershed study of youth homelessness entitled, *Mean Streets: Youth Crime and Homelessness*, "the street is a downward spiral of deviance, danger, and despair" (p. 3). Using an integrated framework that combines strain and control theories, these authors make the case that exposure to life on the streets predisposes youth to offending. In a subsequent study (McCarthy & Hagan, 2005), they provide a list of "risky behaviours" common to homeless youth such as hitchhiking, sleeping in abandoned cars or buildings, and describe the dangers associated with certain types of crime such as theft, drug selling, and prostitution (p. 1071), as exemplars of the factors that contribute to the downward spiral. Others have remarked that objective dangers of street life are well documented: Rates of violence and victimization are greater than those experienced by the Canadian public (Gaetz, 2004, 2009) and victimization is likely to increase

based on length of time spent without a home (Boivin, Roy, Haley, & Galbaud, 2005). While on the street, youth also are known to engage in activities that increase their chances of becoming victims of violence (Hoyt, Ryan, & Cauce, 1999).

Many researchers have noted a rise in criminal involvement among youth who do not have access to legitimate means of self-support, without which a significant number are drawn into illegal activity as a method of survival on the streets (Baron, 2003; Baron et al., 2007; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Experience with deviant behaviours increases the likelihood of victimization (Gaetz, 2004, 2009; Kraus et al., 2001; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Whitbeck et al., 1997) and increases the likelihood of further involvement with deviancy and crime (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 2005). All of the aforementioned factors combine to create a daunting and debilitating experience for at-risk youth. And yet little is known about how youth perceive such challenges and how they survive in the face of so many risks, dangers, and fears.

While youth make up a third of the homeless population (Laird, 2007), they are the least likely to seek help (Gaetz, 2004, 2009; Karabanow, 2004); they instead rely extensively on informal social networks for survival (Tyler & Melander, 2011) and "street families"[1] to reduce their chances of victimization (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy, Hagan, & Martin, 2002). Though youth are considered the most vulnerable population among the homeless (Nickerson, Salamone, Brooks, & Colby, 2004) and much of their behaviour is highly stigmatized (Benoit, Jansson, & Anderson, 2007), they are the least likely to make use of emergency services (e.g., shelters, drop-in centres) that are the settings for most research about homelessness. Thus, they remain a largely understudied group (Bradley, 1997; Kraus et al., 2001; Marshall et al., 2008). There is a dearth of knowledge – particularly longitudinal situated knowledge – about the subjective experiences of homeless youth (Aubry, 2008; Aubry et al., 2007; Benoit et al., 2007; Kidd, 2006; Tyler, 2008; Whitbeck et al., 1999).

The study that is described here seeks to understand these risks not only from the vantage point of the researchers who have thus far sought to conceptualize and analyse these conditions but also from the vantage point of youth – their conceptualizations of risk and how they deal with these, from their points of view. While risk is pervasive in discourses encompassing this population, the intangibility of risk means that all knowledge is contestable and dependent upon interpretation. I argue that the absence of input and collaboration from youth about their experiences renders risk frameworks incomplete. This article bridges these conceptual and empirical gaps by examining the interplay of risk, identity, and structural constraints in homeless youths' everyday lives. The purpose of this article is to offer a broader interpretation of homeless youths' experiences in relation to risk. This study's ontological position argues that there are other experiences, outside of depictions of victimization and deviancy, that have seldom been explored and that these unfold within a complex junction of constrained options. This article is part of a larger ethnographic study that provided a launching pad from which youths' viewpoints about risk frameworks could emerge.

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[1] According to Hagan and McCarthy (1997), "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" (p. 177). Similarly, "youth friendships can augment or replace the intimacy, support, and other resources characteristically provided by families" (McCarthy et al., 2002, p. 831).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Becker (1963) believed that adolescence posed certain problems with regard to social rules, norms, and responsibility:

> Adolescents find themselves surrounded by rules about these matters which have been made by older and more settled people. It is considered legitimate to do this, for youngsters are considered neither wise enough nor responsible enough to make proper rules for themselves. (p. 17)

In this light, adolescents by virtue of their young age are cast as different or deficient from the rest of society (half-child/half-adult) and not fully able to make decisions for themselves. According to Kelly (2000), "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" (p. 463); moreover, he argues that this is an attempt to "regulate youthful identities" (p. 465). Kidd (2009) states that the family histories of most homeless youth are understood to be different or deviate from the ideals of the social norm, further magnifying their "riskiness" thus reinforcing their *otherness*[2]. Being labelled "at risk" has the effect of magnifying perceptions of vulnerability and fragility, due to their young age and their marginalized social status, yet little is known about how they contend with risk in their everyday lives.

This study attended to these unknowns by extending and deepening analyses of risk, identity, and the interplay of structural constraints affecting homeless youth. Risk in the context of this study was understood more broadly and harkened back to an earlier time when notions of risk embodied taking chances (Fox, 1999; Bernstein, 1996) rather than contemporary meanings of potential harm (Lupton, 1999). This alternative conceptualization of risk views risk as neither good nor bad, and invites the complexity of youth perspectives. While grand social theories of risk (Beck, 1992, 1995, 1996; Douglas, 1969, 1985, 1992; Foucault, 1991) tend to explain risk from a macrosociological perspective, they have difficulty describing people's individual experiences in negotiating risk (Lupton, 1999). Notably, the interplay of identity and risk is poorly understood (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). These approaches tend to construct individuals as atomised, self-interested, and calculating actors, rooted in the "homo prudens" or rational actor perspective (Kemshall, 2010). However, risk epistemologies are inevitably mediated through social, cultural, and political frameworks of understanding and motivations, whether expert or risk knowledges. Tulloch and Lupton (2003) argue 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)

Echoing similar orientations found in MacDonald's (2006) work, this article points to difficulties "applying straightforward and influential models of risk assessment and prediction to individual biographies" (p. 371) that are based on rational theory.

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[2] emphasis mine.

This study attempted to bridge this gap between theory and empirical inquiry by offering an empirical foothold regarding how individuals negotiate risk in their everyday lives in relation to their evolving identities. Drawing on a longitudinal ethnographic study with homeless youth in a large urban Canadian city, the major contribution of this article is to offer a more complex understanding of homeless youths' risk frameworks in their everyday lives by combining two approaches, symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. A broad understanding of risk emerged as it better captured the complexity and diversity of homeless youth experiences; embracing the nuances, ambivalence and tensions that tend to co-exist, especially in a context of constrained options.

In a similar vein of subjectivity, identity was a central concept that emerged from the data and shifted in time and place. This study viewed identity construction as provisional, continuous, and complex – a construction having neither a certain goal nor a specific endpoint (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1904). It drew upon theories of experimentation and self-discovery, especially as they pertain to perceiving, taking, and managing risk, which emanated from participants' experiences. It employed aspects of Bajoit's theory of identity based on three interlocking fields: engaged identity (how one views oneself), assigned identity (how one is viewed by others), and desired identity – whom one wishes to become (2003, pp. 102–104). This theory of identity underscores different spheres of interaction – one's view of oneself in a certain time and place, how one is perceived by others (labelling), and how this influences one's self-concept. These were particularly apt concepts for this study and were intimately connected to youths' risk constructs, as will be showcased below.

Epistemological, Ontological, and Methodological Standpoints

This ethnographic study built relationships with participants over a 1- to 4-year period; this was a purposeful attempt to capture the ontological complexity of youth experience. To date, most research has assumed that risks are universally understood, internalized and externalized in a uniform manner, replete with normative assumptions about opportunities, constraints, danger, and excitement. These assumptions however, are often framed in the researcher's perceptions of risks and not framed by those living that experience whose underlying beliefs, motivations, options for survival, and values may be quite divergent. While expert approaches are valuable in giving a sense of the *objective* dangers that may be present, they assume that people view, weigh, and respond to risks in the same manner and that they have access to the same means to overcome obstacles. The theoretical framework of this study assumes that risks are social constructions and are perceived, valued, interpreted, and responded to differently. Risk constructs are dynamic, and are affected by time, context, and social standpoint.

This study employed a qualitative approach, collecting information through participant observation and informal interviewing. This ontological approach captured how youth conceptualize their personal power in estimating, managing, and avoiding or embracing risk, as participants tended to view risk in a multitude of ways. This epistemological approach valued above all the youth's interpretation and subjective understanding of their lived experiences. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), "the constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures" (p. 13). The social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships but instead

view phenomena as social constructions. "[H]uman actions are based upon, or infused by, social meanings: that is, by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules, and values" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 7). In this same way, conceptualizations of risk are complex and dynamic, particularly so when options of survival may deviate from normative conceptualizations of what is acceptable risk. Ethnography allowed for this form of in-depth and situated knowledge to emerge.

Ethnography is a "scientific approach to discovering and investigating social and cultural patterns and meaning in communities, institutions, and other social settings" (Schensul, Schensul, & Lecompte, 1999, p. 1). Ethnographers discover what people do and why before they assign meaning to behaviours and beliefs. As a method of investigation, ethnography differs from other research techniques because it depends on the researcher as the primary tool of data collection (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 1). Immersion in ethnographic research is then twofold. Firstly, it means being with the people under study to see how they respond to events as they experience them, and secondly, experiencing these same events as they happen and experiencing them for oneself. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), the "task of the ethnographer is not to determine 'the truth' but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives" (p. 3).

Participant observation and informal interviewing were the primary methods of data collection. Participant observers hope to learn the culture or the subculture of the people they are studying and to interpret the world in the same way as they do; this form of understanding social phenomena has been coined "verstehen" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 8). In this instance, ethnography using participant observation methods was the best way to facilitate verstehen, so that the researcher's preconceptions of risk were minimized to the extent possible. Data gathering took place over an extended period of time, periods of observation and interaction included encounters from brief (a few minutes) to long (several hours), inside and outside homeless agencies with youth, both individually and in groups. Interactions also occurred with participants through telephone and e-mail correspondence. This longitudinal data was a purposeful attempt to capture the essence of experiences as they were unfolding, and to replace traditional research methods that have relied upon data from a static snapshot based on single point in time. Field notes were taken during non-structured interviews or directly after time spent observing and interacting with youth. From these initial notes and journal entries more elaborate notes were constructed. In this sense, as much as possible, direct verbatim accounts were written in situ or directly after periods of observation, with the aim of capturing the essence and meaning of participants' narratives. The following results showcase a mix of direct quotes and reconstructions of their narratives.

As a social worker on a community outreach team serving homeless youth for almost a decade, I was well integrated within the community to recruit participants who would have been difficult to meet otherwise. My aim was to "follow" 15 homeless youth over a period of one to several years. The participation criteria for the project included participants who were: 16 and 17 years old at the beginning of the study; were 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. Access to participants and initial

recruitment occurred in four agencies that serve homeless youth in Ottawa (Canada). In all, 18 youth participated in the study. The majority of participants were female (12), a third were male (6). 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 cycling through a mélange of substitute care arrangements. Ten youth entered street life directly from their families of origin and were not leaving a substitute care arrangement. All participants experienced housing instability, with a large proportion living on the streets or in emergency shelters. Some youth were seen regularly, on at least a weekly basis, if not several times a week, while others were seen only a couple of times during the study period.

Structural Constraints That Promote a Climate of Risk-Taking

One of the impetuses for this study based on years of clinical observation, is that there are structural constraints impinging on this younger cohort that push them into an arena of constrained options, despite being designated a vulnerable group. These structural obstacles make it more difficult for this group to eke out a living in socially legitimate ways and have the effect of pulling them into activities deemed more dangerous or marginal. In the Province of Ontario, Canada (where the study took place), the simple act of 16- or 17-year-old youths leaving "home" ultimately determines their legal autonomy, meaning there are no legislative provisions that allow a youth to become emancipated. This represents a significant equality rights issue. At one end, these youth are not required to submit to parental control; at the other, they have not reached the age of majority and are subsequently denied legislated adult benefits. They are in a kind of no-status limbo where the resources are often paltry and difficult to access. While these young people attempt to live independently, they cannot access resources as easily as adults (e.g., housing, social assistance). Paradoxically, they represent a more stigmatized and vulnerable group due to their young age. Incongruously, however, these issues are rarely examined as separate and distinct from the youths' older counterparts in the literature. The "system" (i.e., social assistance, supportive and/or transitional housing, shelters) often poses enormous challenges, aspects of which will be examined below.

Social Assistance

According to participants, social assistance (welfare) was difficult if not almost impossible to obtain, for a multitude of reasons. One of the criteria needed for an application for social assistance in Ontario – known as Ontario Works (OW) – is possessing valid ID or identification (e.g., driver's licence, health card, etc.). However, many youth do not have requisite ID cards before hitting the streets and if they do, it is often not long before they are stolen (a frequent occurrence) or lost. Chris[3], who had cycled in and out of detention centres for the past several years stated: "*I can't get OW. I am not 18 and I have no ID, so I don't bother trying to apply*". He revealed that he commits petty crimes and theft to support himself because he does not believe he can access social assistance. Some of the other constraints that participants identified included needing to prove to the OW worker that their previous home was unsafe. This determination was made by the worker after consulting the participant's parent or guardian instead of being based on the youth's testimony. Participants often felt betrayed by a

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[3] Pseudonyms are employed throughout.

system before they attempted to rely on it because they felt their stories of mistreatment or conflict with parents were not viewed by workers as justifiable reasons to leave home. Moreover, youth needed to be enrolled in school full-time to be eligible for OW (unlike their older counterparts). In some instances, exceptional circumstances permitted a youth to be enrolled in some form of treatment (e.g., addictions or mental health counselling) as an alternative to not being enrolled in school, but it was still within the discretionary authority of the worker to refuse or accept this option.

Annie did not apply for social assistance because she perceived it as being too difficult to obtain: "*When you are 16 or 17 you are in limbo. ... [OW] is impossible to get. ... How are we supposed to manage being in school when we don't have a place to live?*" Approximately half of the youth shared the same opinion; as Luke noted: "*I got tired of waiting on the phone for hours for the intake. I called back so many times that eventually I just gave up*". Claire revealed that she cancelled her application when she found out they would have to contact her parents: "*I was really worried* [my parents] *would find out where I am or that my information would be shared with them. I just want to be left alone. I'll make money another way. I can always panhandle or sell my art*". Michelle was told that she would have to go back to her high school, but stated: "*I just can't go back there. I was cutting class all the time and hiding out in the bathroom. I had no friends. I felt like I was suffocating*". Most participants did not want to be forced to go back to school, did not feel they could trust workers to keep their information confidential, did not want to be reliant on the "system", and certainly did not want to be told by a social assistance worker what to do, so they opted not to continue with the application process and found other ways to survive.

It is important to note that other researchers have found that youth are proportionately less likely to be reliant on social assistance than their adult counterparts. O'Grady and Gaetz (2009) found that only 15% of their sample relied on social assistance and this fact "reflects the barriers to obtaining and maintaining such benefits for people who are young, out of school, and without shelter" (p. 9). This study found that only four participants (of 18) were successful in obtaining social assistance when they were 16 and 17 years old, and more participants became reliant on income assistance once they turned 18 or had children to care for as they found it easier to access.

Housing

Unfortunately, youth in this study identified just as many barriers when attempting to access housing. Supportive and affordable housing systems and the private market were described by youth as posing too many barriers to access, or as unappealing due to the imposition of "rules". Olivia had applied for a supportive housing room but she needed to prove to the housing provider and OW that she had already attended school for two weeks. For Olivia, who had been homeless for approximately two years, this was not realistic given that she had not attended secondary school since hitting the streets. Supportive housing was also perceived by several youth as having "too many rules" (e.g., curfews, no overnight guests, no alcohol or drugs on the premises, and no pets). Many participants stated they wanted to have more freedom and not be treated, as Shane noted, "*like kids, not babysat*". Many cited supportive housing as unappealing and constraining.

Many participants also described their inability to access the rental market. With long waiting lists for public housing (5 to 10 years), many youth searched fruitlessly in the private market. Without a prior rental history and the mistaken belief commonly held by landlords that they cannot rent to individuals under 18 years of age, renting a private room or an apartment was an insurmountable challenge. They were told frequently when making inquiries that they needed a co-signer to rent a place. Casey admitted that, "*no one will rent to a 16 year old. If you are 16 you are discredited. Landlords told me I need to get a co-signer and to ask my social worker to co-sign. But my social worker told me to find someone else to co-sign. ... Who am I going to find?*"

When youth did find a landlord who would rent to them, the housing was often substandard and their tenancy precarious. Tyler revealed that he had recently rented an apartment in a more dangerous part of town, stating the only reason the landlord rented it to him was because he gave him $1,200 in cash up-front: "*The landlord told me, 'you look a little young,' but after I flashed him the $1,200 he went to get the keys*". Like Tyler, many youth wound up renting apartments in more dangerous parts of town with limited rental agreements. Youth were often evicted from these situations and many were uninformed about their tenancy rights. Informal and less secure rental arrangements were often the only means participants had of entering the rental market. The downside was that their tenancy was often insecure, at the mercy of the landlord, and rentals tended to be located in more dangerous areas of the city.

Daniel could not find a place to live and rented a room in a rooming house that he described as a "*big set up*":

> *Everyone in this rooming house was doing crack. I mean the dealer lived in the building and he knew when it was cheque day* [when people would receive their cheques from social assistance]. *You wouldn't even see your money, it would just be handed over to the crack dealer ... there was no way you were going to pay the rent.*

Daniel admitted he spent all his money on crack, was evicted, and wound up homeless again. He stated the most easily accessible places for 16- and 17-year-olds to rent were located in the rooming houses where, ironically, the most dangerous risks lurk. He explained that such places not only served as gateways into harder and more addictive drugs, but also fostered an environment of violence and criminality (theft, prostitution, drug dealing) in which one became a target for predators and never felt safe.

Cost was another obstacle for participants trying to access housing in the private market. Several youth managed to secure a place but because it was beyond what they could reasonably afford, they wound up letting many friends "crash" with them to help pay the rent. The overcrowding often ended in eviction. Ingrid revealed that her one-bedroom apartment now housed eight people and that she was spending most of her money on drugs. She and her boyfriend had stopped living there even though they had paid the rent because there was too little privacy and security.

Youth revealed many of the "system's" failures. These barriers create undue risks that push and pull youth to make different choices within a narrow range of already constrained options. It also forced them to manipulate systems to their advantage to create opportunities for survival. For instance, some younger youth lied about their age to shelter staff in order to access the adult shelter system, pushing them into arguably more vulnerable spaces in the adult systems where greater opportunities for exploitation and victimization may exist. The barriers posed by social assistance, housing systems, and shelters pushed many youth to find creative strategies to survive, and generally pulled them into more dangerous contexts. This paradoxical phenomenon has not been fully explored but the irony was evident in youths' narratives. Participants described the risks they felt obligated to take due to social safety nets that did not respond to their needs, were perceived as inaccessible, or posed too many constraints – despite the fact that these systems are established to protect vulnerable youth.

Survival and Identity Experimentation

Youth's identities shifted based on their changing needs and constrained opportunities. This study used aspects of Bajoit's (1999, 2000, 2003) theories of identity formation to unravel youths' identities in relation to risk. This approach espouses that identity construction is always provisional and evolving and is based on an intersecting trilogy that ties past histories with present experiences and projects future ideals of selfhood. It represents a conceptual framework that is apt for deconstructing the complexity and evolution of youth experience in relation to identity formation and risk.

The different forms of work that youth engaged in (often because they could not access socially legitimate systems) is an aspect of street life that had a huge impact both on identity and risk. Attempting new forms of work – particularly in the informal economy – came with its own risks, which several authors have explored (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). Working in the informal economy entailed work that included but was not limited to panhandling, squeegee-ing, buying and selling items, stealing, drug dealing, participating in surveys, working for agencies (including internships and acting as resources for agencies involved in community engagement work), babysitting, sex-trade work (including telephone solicitation), informal work in the service industry (getting paid "under the table" or in-kind), and working for family members or friends. Participants used their street-savvy skills to survive by: selling marijuana or other drugs (a common activity reported by almost half of participants), selling items (stolen or second-hand), panhandling (half of participants), squeegee-ing (a third of participants), or hired to work under the table in various capacities (half of the female participants reported working in restaurants, babysitting, phone solicitation, handing out flyers, carnival work, and transsexual impersonation). Male participants who had difficulties accessing formal resources tended to identify more strongly with deviant representations, often bound up in notions that they were hustlers, robbers, predators, and opportunists, perhaps indicating the common social perception and stigma that males occupy more deviant roles in society.

Lucy revealed the myriad ways she made money. She was an intravenous (IV) drug user who was articulate around issues regarding responsible drug use that made her attractive to agencies that served youth struggling with addiction. She was hired as a peer support worker and advocate for harm reduction strategies. Lucy was also resourceful when it came to making

money; she knew which research surveys were taking place and how much participants were remunerated. When she could not make enough money through certain means of work (e.g., surveys, youth engagement, and outreach work), she admitted resorting to stealing, but said she only did so when she felt she had no other option. Lucy was very concerned about maintaining her "*$20 a day habit*" and in fact stated that her "*whole day revolved around how you are going to make the money for your habit so that you don't get sick from not maintaining your use and using clean 'gear'* [instruments]". While initially quite open about her drug use and passionate about issues related to safe injection use, she admitted that she had not revealed this aspect of her identity (her continued use) to her family and some workers. She feared that it could negatively affect her relationships, as many believed she was not currently using substances. Lucy was eloquent and outraged about the kinds of risks that were inherent for young women acquiring drugs:

> *Being a young woman, men are always after you for sex, trying to pick you up, offering you loaded needles to sleep with them, or they'll say they'll give you free drugs for a month if you sleep with them. Being a substance user means it's dangerous to get the drugs you need and use them safely. I try to go to X [large adult shelter] to buy my drugs but guys always stop us [her and her boyfriend], they threaten to beat up my boyfriend because they say 'why are you getting a young girl hooked on dope', they try to deny me access to the drugs I need.*

Having a drug dependency was, according to Lucy, another element that put her at greater risk, since, "*it's dangerous to get the drugs you need and use them safely*". She felt she was dependent on her boyfriend to acquire her drugs because many of the dealers would not sell to her unless she would have sex with them. However, when her boyfriend would attempt to buy their drugs, the dealers would want to "*beat him up*" and would accuse him of "*getting her hooked on dope*". Lucy's engaged, assigned, and desired identities fought for prominence at different times and for different purposes: ranging from a responsible and creative IV drug user who survived the constraints that street life poses, particularly considering the violence faced by young women who use drugs (engaged), to a highly politicized peer advocate who projects the image that she is in recovery (assigned). Lucy used these different understandings of herself to meet different ends. Lucy dabbled between normalized representations of herself as "responsible" (assigned) and the more marginalized, hidden "other" (engaged). In essence, she led a "double life". This identity theme was a strong undercurrent in participants' stories, utilizing different facets of one's identity to survive in the face of constraints.

Participants experimented with their self-concept, and in this sense displayed some feelings of control and power within the contexts in which they found themselves. Engaging in different forms of work, particularly in the informal economy (as noted earlier: selling drugs/items, panhandling, squeegee-ing, babysitting, and phone-sex solicitation) allowed youth the chance to experiment with different roles and gave many the feeling of some control and power over their own lives; however, this was often within an arena of constrained choices (i.e., structural obstacles such as access to labour and housing markets). Many participants described the different roles they assumed in order to meet their needs (e.g., lying about drug use to preserve relationships with family members or service providers), and shaped these accounts as stories of survival. Youth slid into different roles and in various domains that oscillated between

mainstream and more marginal existences (school, housing, formal and informal work, family, street friends). Indeed, boundaries were found to be muted and slippery and depended very much on what kinds of activities youth were engaged in, what kind of identity they wanted to project, and the context of relationships and resources.

It would not be accurate, however, to suggest that all of the participants worked in the informal economy. A little less than a third denied ever being engaged in any work in the informal economy, while two-thirds of them dabbled in it (with one-third of the total being quite actively involved on a daily basis). Nonetheless, all participants noted that socially legitimate resources were difficult to access and affected the choices they made on the street. Most of the youth who were more active in the formal economy (roughly half the group by the end of the study) had limited experience working in service-industry jobs that they described as insecure and temporary. Those attempting to disengage from street life chose more recognized forms of work in the formal economy and gradually slipped into more "normal" and socially acceptable roles. This greatly impacted their identities and the kinds of risks they took.

Stigma, Power, and Complex Social Representations

The perception that youth felt they were viewed as deviant because of their identification with street life was a common theme; the stigma of being labelled a "street kid" or an "addict" had a strong resonance among participants. When youth were victims of crimes they felt particularly judged and re-victimized by systems that were supposed to protect them – a phenomenon that has been addressed in the literature (Gaetz, 2004; Karabanow, 2004). For example, Laura had been assaulted and tried reporting the incident to the police but felt that her concerns were not taken seriously because of her young age and homeless status. Police told her they were too busy to deal with the case and asked her to come back when they were less busy. Several participants revealed that they felt unfairly judged because of their young age and their experiences were delegitimized because they were just a "street kid".

Conversely, many youth felt they had some power in relationships with authority figures and several shared stories of their savoir-faire and how they sometimes used their "vulnerability" to their advantage. For example, some participants knew to ask for an officer's badge number and a supervisor's name when they were being targeted, and many confessed they told service providers what they wanted to hear in order to maintain access to services. These efforts served to limit the power that authority figures exerted over them. Many also admitted that they lived a "double life", lying to family or service providers about drug use, violence, or living on the streets in order to preserve relationships. Participants were also very aware about how their appearance affected opportunities and judgment and treatment by others. When dealing with opportunities in the mainstream world, many youth tried to alter and soften their image for job or housing interviews to present themselves as more appealing. Michelle pretended to be in school full time when looking for a part-time job because she felt she would have a better chance with employers if they believed she lived a more "normal" life.

Some participants also told stories of the powerful roles they played on the streets, acknowledging that they sometimes occupied spaces of oppressors. In fact, some youth named other youth as their main sources of oppression and risk on the streets. Claire's story paints an

extreme version of peer network oppression; she reported being marginalized by a group of homeless youth who limited her access to services and friendships:

> *I ended up getting barred from the shelter because this girl accused me of sexual harassment and even contacted the police because the group leader told her to lie. They wanted to charge me with sexual harassment, but they had no proof. They* [agency] *also barred me from using the drop-in because she had lied to the police and told them I was stalking her. We* [the girl and herself] *used to go to the same group at the hospital and I just tried talking to her on the bus but then she turned it around and told them I was stalking her…. She hangs out with this group that hates me…. They've beaten me up twice and won't leave me alone and no one wants to hang out with me because they are scared of them, especially the group leader – "the queen". She* [the ring leader] *wants to be the queen of downtown, she has a lot of people scared. But I don't believe in violence and I let her hit me. I don't fight back because violence doesn't solve anything.*

Claire admitted that when she slept outside she had to sleep alone because everyone else was too frightened to be associated with her. She was not allowed to access the shelter or drop-in services because of the lingering sexual harassment charge. Curiously, she never lamented these constraints. She utilized her school friendships and college resources to eke out a living and maintain a social life, and was somewhat philosophical about the group's impact on her life:

> *It's fine, it's okay for now, it's not such a big deal. I mean what more can I do? Everyone downtown is too scared to be around me. I just stay in the west end, mostly at the college library, and I see some of my old school friends from my old 'hood* [neighbourhood]. *Sometimes they will come downtown and pan* [panhandle] *with me outside of McDonald's. I always make do, get by, survive.*

She rationalized this form of survival in terms of her "difference", stating she always felt different because she had been adopted at a young age from another country (identifying with her engaged and assigned identities). This solidified her belief that she was adaptable, a survivor, and somehow different from other people. Claire's risk perception, however, was impacted by the threats and this transformed her risk practices, as she limited the amount of time she spent downtown. While her choices were affected, she described having to creatively adapt to these constraints and use alternative resources to survive; this form of adaptability to decrease risk was central to how she perceived herself.

Youth were keenly aware of the multiple roles they played and projected to increase opportunities for stability, to diminish legal consequences of criminal involvement, to gain the services or resources they needed, or to start the process of disengagement from street life. These notions run counter to the passive *otherness* frequently described in the literature. It demonstrates that youth are thoughtful about constraints and their options and are acutely aware of stigma and social representations, including knowing when and how to manipulate them in order to survive.

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The aim of this study was not to prescribe interventions but to offer a starting point for exploration into how homeless youth conceptualize risk. Indeed, it was to explore how youth make assessments about risk, and what strategies they employ to minimize harm or maximize benefits in the face of so many obstacles. Risk assessments were heterogeneous and ran the gamut from those participants who were extremely risk-averse to those who were complete risk-embracers (or who at least espoused beliefs that they were fearless in order to portray an image of rebellion). Thus, it is difficult to state any unequivocal truths about participants' perceptions and responses to risk. Moreover, the results of this study are not generalizable due to the small sample size. Having said that, a few broad lessons can be drawn from the results.

It is important to highlight another dimension of the homeless youth experience that has rarely been promoted, and that is one of adaptability and creativity encompassed within a framework of survivability and resilience – notions that often necessitate taking risks. Taking risks is a common element of the homeless youth experience, whether it is understood in terms of adolescent needs (as exemplified in psychological, sociological, and anthropological theories of adolescence) or due to structural constraints. Street life opportunities conceptualized as active risk-taking was provided as a rationale for being drawn to the streets by more than half of the group. These youth indicated that they felt they had more control over their lives and ultimately more power over choices on the streets than in their previous lives.

As a starting point, it is important to ground our knowledge of risk from youths' viewpoints instead of rooting them in expert discourses. Basing interventions on experts' points of view will only exacerbate pre-existing dissonances between "helpers" and their interventions and the lives of homeless youth. One of the objectives of this study was not to superimpose ideas of victimization, deviance, and risk onto youths' experiences but rather to begin where they are at. The same principle should hold for intervention. By embracing this approach, an unfolding of context and meanings can occur and conceptualizations of risk will have relevance for the targeted youth.

This study revealed several assumptions and paradoxes. Participants tended not to characterize their experiences as examples of victimization but instead considered harmful experiences as character-shaping. Some (e.g., Ingrid) described themselves as "warriors" but many viewed themselves as survivors who were resourceful and creative, and who were not necessarily passive but who instead actively practiced resistance against those who tried to exert authority over them (e.g., police, other youth). This study found that most participants were thoughtful about their lives, their identities, and their relationships with others, and were very conscious of social stigma. Moreover, their risk frameworks were malleable and shifted over time based on the accumulation of new and monumental experiences, which also served to shape and reshape the construction of their identities.

Another finding was that participants' relationships to drug use were rife with ambivalence. Use was conceived of as both constraining and liberating. A few participants described the stigma associated with drug use and the need to lead a "double life", thus hiding their use to maintain relationships with family or service providers. The risks inherent in the

acquisition of drugs for young women were also elucidated by a few participants, especially the risk of sexual exploitation (i.e., exchanging sex for drugs). It is important to have this broad view of risk when assessing drug use, not only in terms of employing a harm-reduction approach to the actual utilization but also applying such an approach to the context of minimizing the inherent dangers involved in acquisition. Moreover, examining both the drawbacks and benefits of drug use is a better starting point for intervention because it recognizes the ambivalence many youth have about their use, and it acknowledges the freedom/dependency paradox.

Another central contribution is that conceptualizations of risk are very much embedded in who we perceive ourselves to be, how we think we are perceived by others, and who we wish to become. Utilizing Bajoit's (1999, 2000, 2003) tripartite theory of identity construction allowed for a deeper understanding of the connection between participants' perception of risk and these identity constructs. Judgments about risk were intuitive, organic (rooted in the youths' ideas about themselves, others, their histories), and affected by localized dangers and opportunities. This implication runs counter to ideas expounded in the risk society thesis (Beck, 1992, 1996). Indeed, risk constructs not only were embedded in the "who" youth perceived and desired themselves to be, but also by the "what" of local contexts. Significant events, brought about by experimenting with different roles and different living arrangements in order to survive, also greatly transformed their notions of risk. These experiences pushed youth to consider the risks (dangers and opportunities) inherent in continuing with certain aspects of street life. This dynamic nature of identity construction underscored the shifting and evolving nature of risk perception and practices. What this means for practice and theory is that identity is very much embedded in our understanding of risk, and is directly linked to our assessments and tolerance of risk; however, this has not been examined previously and requires further investigation.

One of the most important findings of this study, is that structural barriers facing 16 and 17 year olds pose enormous obstacles that push them to make constrained and sometimes "dangerous" choices (e.g., renting a room in a rooming house, working under the table) that may lead to exploitation or poor health (e.g., deficient addictions resources for this age group in which they are forced to share instruments due to lack of services for those under 18). While there is a tendency to view this younger cohort of the population as vulnerable and requiring protection, there is a lack of resources and choice within existing services and policies, especially as they are denied access to adult services such as social assistance, shelters, housing and labour markets, and addictions services. Several participants revealed that the social assistance system for 16 and 17 year olds was so onerous, cumbersome, and difficult to obtain, that they did not apply. In particular, needing to contact family members in order to prove that residing with them was not an option, was a risk some participants were not willing to take as they were fearful their location might be revealed to family. Finding the home unfit was also a determination made by the front-line worker; many participants felt these workers were biased and could relate better to their parents. Workers' judgment of eligibility was a common complaint among youth. Participants' perceived these determinations to be laden with strong moral undertones that made them feel that they were failures for not living at home and attending school regularly. These barriers meant that youth often sought other ways of making money in the informal economy, including but not limited to panhandling, squeegee-ing, buying and selling items, drug dealing, and sex work. One of the ways these challenges could be addressed is by making social assistance easier to obtain and by not requiring families to be contacted.

Similarly, housing systems represent another hurdle for this age group. While there are some affordable social housing units, it is never enough, nor is there enough choice. Moreover, the private market poses many barriers due to landlords' lack of knowledge regarding tenant rights and age criteria (e.g., many believe that 16 and 17 year olds need a co-signer), and landlords discriminate against youth based on their age and association with the streets. Again, this pushes youth into arguably dangerous places to rent (e.g., rooming houses) and precarious rental arrangements. Participants were often unaware of their tenancy rights and were frequently exploited (e.g., substandard housing that does not comply with government regulations), or evicted without just cause over the course of the study.

This research has several potential outcomes for intervention with youth. Clinically, providing workers with increased knowledge regarding youths' conceptualizations of risk will help develop a more collaborative intervention plan and may mitigate future dangers. This knowledge could also help orient new workers to the realities and complexities of the hazards, opportunities, and constrained choices homeless youth face. On a policy level, the structural barriers that increase a climate of risk-taking that frequently leads to victimization or criminalization of homeless youth needs to be underscored. These findings support the need for better housing, employment, and supports for homeless youth, including peer supports and communities that actively promote resilience (as argued by Reid, 2011). Moreover, it is hoped that this study demonstrates the heterogeneity of the population and their experiences, and thus supports the central importance of engaging youth in service provision and planning to better meet their needs, while also using their keen insights to develop more effective policy.

Conclusion

In sum, this brief portrayal displays the challenges this group faces and the resilient ways in which they seek to overcome system constraints. This analysis adds complexity to the youth-at-risk discourses that tend to trap them in a passive "otherness". A common element in participant's narratives, ranging from the very street-entrenched to those living more of a mainstream existence, was the notion of adaptability, creativity, and survival. Youth were savvy in using aspects of their assigned and engaged identities to cross over into the mainstream by assuming "socially appropriate" roles as students, workers, or tenants, in the search for social recognition and integration and, paradoxically, survival in the face of so many obstacles. All the youth in this study – whether they self-identified as the family scapegoat, the target of group victimization, or the powerful street hustler – recounted their stories in some light of surviving some experience. They demonstrated their resiliency by deploying creative responses to system constraints and social stigma, which often necessitated taking risks.

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