

Naomi Nichols (2014)

Youth Work: An Institutional Ethnography of Youth Homelessness

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In *Youth Work*, Nichols draws on an institutional ethnography and community-based research, which was conducted over the course of more than one year at an Ontario youth emergency shelter – ‘Street Youth Shelter, Middlesborough’. Nichols adopts a definition of youth work in the book that extends beyond the work of a “child and youth worker” (p.5) to include “all of the things young people do in institutional settings... as well as the activities of *any* practitioner who works with youth” (p.6). She argues that the work of young people and practitioners is co-ordered (Miller and Rose, 2008) “in ways that contribute to young people’s institutional and social marginalization” (p.6) and illustrates this through revealing a number of institutional ‘cracks’ that young people fall through as they, for example, attempt to access social assistance, or wish to terminate a relationship with the child welfare system or engage with the child mental health system.

Nichols provides a clear introduction, outlining the main aspects to her research, the definition of youth work adopted in the book and how the concepts of governmentality and ruling relations have informed her analysis, ending with a brief overview of each chapter. Chapter 1 is a particular strength of the book, providing an open, honest and reflective account of the research process and methodological approach. It offers a detailed description of the research site, the Street Youth Shelter (SYS) and of the various participants. Fieldwork was conducted over one and a half years, including 27 formal interviews with young people, 14 interviews with adult practitioners – both frontline and at management level (including shelter workers, police officers, educators, crisis workers, mental health nurses and Children’s Aid Society (CAS) workers), a focus group with six young people who were Crown wards, participant observation, informal conversations and textual analysis. We are provided with a picture of young people who have significant institutional involvement – including with the CAS, alternative schooling (albeit intermittently), mental health and youth justice services.

However, more detail could be provided on the background of young people in terms of their homeless and housing histories and their stories of coming to live at the SYS.

Interviews with young people were in-depth, shaped by their response to the initial question 'How did you come to stay at SYS?', but with a focus on the institutional work that preceded and followed this event. A good reflection is provided on the importance of gaining trust with the participants and the challenges faced in getting young people to talk about their institutional work. Practitioner interviews focused on how individuals engaged texts or 'text-mediated technologies' in their youth work, which leads to the 'distinct contribution' of institutional ethnography.

The following three chapters use young people's accounts to illustrate how they "slipped through the cracks" – what Nichols terms "moments of disjuncture" (p.24) – due to ineffectual institutional engagement. Chapter 2 draws on Nichols' first interview, which was with a young man, Khaled, who had arrived in Ontario aged 8 as a refugee and was aged 18 at the time of the study. The analysis focuses on his work to secure housing after having been discharged from Ontario Children's Aid Society (CAS) 'care' at the age of 16. What follows is a story of frustration as Khaled struggles to 'get welfare', an attempt that is connected to finding a safe place to sleep and his ability to navigate social assistance, child welfare, education and immigration systems. Access to accommodation was denied because Khaled did not 'have welfare', while at the same time he struggled to demonstrate eligibility as he lacked social and health insurance numbers and his situation was further complicated by his refugee status, which required him to reapply for social insurance and health cards every year. Furthermore, he is unable to apply for permanent residency because he cannot provide the required documentation, such as a birth certificate or passport. In this account, Nichols weaves the textual analysis in a way that provides an important context for Khaled's struggles, clearly highlighting the "complex of densely enmeshed policies and procedures" (p.37) that added to Khaled's frustration.

Chapter 3 draws on the stories of four young people – Janella, Sylvia, Aiden and Keelyn – to demonstrate the difficulties faced by CAS-involved young people in terminating their relationships with the child welfare system. While the phrase commonly used by young people, 'signing out of care', suggests a relatively simple process, the young people's stories revealed a complex institutional context in which they and their families struggled. While the textual analysis in this chapter helped to illuminate this complexity, at times this broke up the young people's narratives, particularly earlier in the chapter, which could have been drawn on more.

Stella was the longest resident at the SYS – staying there from the age of 15 to 18 – and her story is the focus of Chapter 4, which examines ‘Youth at Risk’. Stella’s experience reflected what Hopper *et al.* (1997) would identify as life on the ‘institutional circuit’, as in addition to staying in the SYS for three years, she was also repeatedly institutionalised in a number of mental health and youth justice facilities, returning to a “clinical treatment centre for youth” on each release from custody. The resultant “upheaval” (p.71) impacted on Stella’s personal relationships and participation in educational opportunities, with lockdown facilities, in particular, affecting her personal well-being. This also brought Stella into contact with a wide range of professionals who were charged with managing the risk Stella was thought to pose – a threat evidenced by her street involvement, abuse, crime, substance use, mental health issues, lack of stable housing and absence of social supports (psychiatrists, psychologists, police officers, teachers, youth workers, probation officers, child welfare workers or shelter workers). Her refusal on several occasions, however, to participate in institutional relations, at least in the expected ways, meant that she was often subject to interventions against her will (p.66). Nichols follows Stella’s experiences through the account of a police officer, who details his professional obligations and his responsibility to minimise the risk posed by an individual with a mental illness to themselves or others, often resulting in an involuntary hospital visit for psychiatric assessment. Nichols argues that such efforts to manage risk are linked to a need to demonstrate accountability and that it is not so much about the risk that people like Stella pose to themselves and others, but rather the risk posed to intervening agencies who struggled to know how to work with these young people.

Chapter 5 continues this focus on practitioners’ views of their work with young people. In her analysis, Nichols reveals an institutional preoccupation with accountability and risk management, which, despite the dedicated work of professionals as evidenced in their accounts, supersedes their responding to the needs of the young people with whom they work. Nichols highlights the dangers of individualistic ‘cover your ass work’, which aims to protect a worker’s or organisation’s professional reputation and describes the ways in which institutional processes do not meet the immediate needs of young people who are in need of stable housing. The gathering and dissemination of data, for example, is used as evidence of whether individuals/agencies are doing their jobs, rather than used to improve services for young people.

Chapter 6 details Nichols’ experiences of community-based research and using its findings to inform the development of a life-skills programme for young people – the Transitioning Life-Skills Program (TLP). The chapter outlines how Nichols uses political theory to interpret the research findings and takes account of the embeddedness of neo-liberal values in programmes, policies and institutional practices

evident in youth work. The idea of focusing on life-skills development – focusing on skills related to budgeting, healthy eating, health work and safe sexual practices – originated from shelter workers' accounts and, suggests Nichols, reflects a neo-liberal shift where risk management is increasingly individualised (p.119). This was in contradiction to young people's accounts, which did not identify a lack of life skills as the reason for their housing instability. The development of the TLP was informed by data collected in the first six months of the research and the programme aims to work individually with young people to help them live independently from family members or the care system. Nichols' reflection on her field notes – related to the period where she acted as the programme coordinator on a voluntary basis – provides insight into the complex terrain of accountability which was "challenging" to maintain (p.122). In another open and honest account, Nichols, using the example of her work with one young man, 'Jordan', reflects on how the need to be accountable to the programme's funders influenced her own actions at the cost of taking account of young people's experiences.

In the Conclusion chapter, Nichols offers her reflections on key aspects of her research and on philosophical questions that emerged in the research process. In doing so, she draws on her experience of mentoring university students – pre-service teacher educators – and, through exploring her field notes and the work of students, she highlights commonalities of experiences, including the emotional context of their work and the importance of acknowledging the cultural context of human activity, and she reflects on the meaning and significance of the term 'community'. Nichols concludes with a strong argument to shift attention from the tendency to 'fix' individuals and individual families towards "reimagining the 'system'". This, for Nichols, includes recognising the ways in which institutional relations and systems may negatively impact on the lives of those who engage with them and that for institutional engagement to be effective, it needs to understand the broader contexts of young people's lives – the individual, social, familial, environmental and institutional factors.

Whilst the book would benefit from more reference to existing research on young people's experiences of unstable housing and homelessness, *Youth Work* is an engaging text that represents a valuable contribution to the literature. Its interest will extend to a wide audience including practitioners and policymakers in the areas of social work, youth work and education. Its reflective accounts of the research process also make it of great value to those with an interest in ethnographic and community-based research.



› **References**

Hopper, K., Jost, J., Hay, T., Welber, S. and Haugland, G. (1997) Homelessness, Severe Mental Illness, and the Institutional Circuit, *Psychiatric Services* 48(5) pp.659-664.

Miller, P. and Rose, N. (2008) *Governing the Present* (Malden, MA: Polity).

Mary Louise Corr

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

Queens University, Belfast