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Reimagining Intervention in Young Lives

Work, Social Assistance, and Marginalization

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Contents

Acknowledgments

This book is only here because forty-five young people were willing to share their stories with two strangers. We think they trusted us with their stories because they trusted Ottawa Youth Employment's director and the other dedicated individuals who work with the city's homeless and disadvantaged young people. If it was not for the director's questions, and his desire to know more, to make his organization better for the clientele it aimed to serve, we would not have gained access to the oft-missed people whose narrated experiences fill the pages of this book. Ottawa Youth Employment (OYE) closed its doors in the spring of 2011, but we hope this book becomes part of its quiet legacy.

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Reimagining Intervention in Young Lives

Introduction

Just steps away from Parliament Hill, the heart of the federal government in Canada's capital city of Ottawa, the corridor of the nation's power ends and the home of the city's formally powerless begins. There, on Rideau Street, dozens of noisy red buses clip by each minute. The doors of the busy Rideau Centre spew shoppers onto the sidewalk; taxicabs lurk curbside, and the music of street performers mingles in the air with the ignored shouts of ebullient, confused, or distressed people who call the street their home. The neighbourhoods around Rideau Street are marked by some of the most abject poverty in the city, although they stand in the shadows and the glare of expensive high-rise condos and health clubs, and feed into the high-end retail-scapes of the Byward Market.

In these neighbourhoods, homeless shelters and drop-in centres are the warm and welcoming antidote to the cold pavement and colder shoulders Rideau Street presents to the people who live in its high-crime, low-income areas. Many of these centres are geared specifically to young people who are "at risk," homeless, and disadvantaged, who have dropped out of high school and/or run away from home. Until early 2011, one of the centres tucked behind Rideau Street was home to Ottawa Youth Employment (OYE),[1] a non-profit that aimed to help unemployed young people gain work skills and experience through supervised employment on short-term, government-funded projects (and one ongoing moving business). The projects were usually manual labour; recent ones included refurbishing antique cars for auction, and renovating the kitchen of another nearby non-profit organization. While on contract, young workers were supervised by the director of OYE, who lent his abilities as a mechanic to the task, and also counselled his employees in job interview skills, resume building, and even how to dress and present appropriately to a potential employer and society at large.

The program struggled from year to year. It was constantly in need of new project ideas, especially as government prerogatives changed – for example,

projects that include some measure of environmental sustainability, or that train employees in computer and web skills, are the kind currently most likely to win bids for funding. Just after our fieldwork concluded, OYE was forced to move into a small office in the home of another local youth program. Months after the first draft of this book was submitted to publishers, OYE closed its doors completely, its staff and director contemplating other social enterprises to run in its place. However, coming up with projects likely to attract government money was only part of the organization's problem. In 2008, OYE's director was becoming increasingly troubled by the fact that more and more of the people he tried to help were leaving the program before it finished, not showing up for work, or simply not signing up in the first place. He wanted to know what was going on, and he wanted to hear it from the young people themselves. He issued a call to social researchers in the Ottawa area, asking for an interview-based study of young people who frequented the drop-in centre next door to OYE, from which he usually drew his program's participants.

So we, Karen Foster and Dale Spencer, interviewed forty-five of the drop-in centre's patrons between the ages of 16 and 24. All were unemployed,[2] and the majority were receiving social assistance from either Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).[3] (An overview of each program, along with a list of further reading, is included in Appendix 3.) A small minority of participants were not personally recipients of social assistance but lived with a parent who was, or had come off social assistance within the last month. Housing situations varied, with some participants living on the street, some living on friends' couches, some in temporary housing or shelters, and others living independently with friends or family, paying rent with their OW money.[4] Some were involved with the employment program, but because the program was very small, most were not.[5]

We began with the intention of answering the program director's specific question: why weren't more young, unemployed, homeless or poor people taking advantage of his program? He could see many potential participants milling around the youth drop-in centre next door to his office, many of them unemployed and in serious need of money, but they were not signing up to work for him. Those who did sign up would sometimes sleep through a scheduled shift or just stop showing up in the middle of a project. The number of "success stories" he could use to market his organization to funders was troublingly low. It soon became clear to us that OYE was not doing anything *wrong*, per se, but the conditions under which the program was operating – in the political, social, and economic sense, in Ottawa and beyond – made it nearly impossible for OYE to do much of anything *right*. It also became clear that the data we were collecting were too rich, too telling, to limit our inquiry to this particular intervention program's success.

Instead – or in addition – we closed in on a critical assessment of intervention in general.

Intervention and Risk

We tend to take it for granted that people living within a given geopolitical boundary – like a nation, for example – constitute a "population," and that the state's job is to manage that population. But this idea is historically new. As historians and sociologists like Deborah Lupton have pointed out, the act of seeing citizens as a "'society,' a social body requiring intervention, management and protection so as to maximize wealth, welfare and productivity," can be traced to the first modern states of Europe in the eighteenth century.[6] The historical contingency of those governing aims – intervention, management, and protection – tells us immediately that they are not simply the natural or only way for governments to govern. Studying them in their historical context, moreover, tells us that they were not developed abstractly or in a vacuum. Therefore, there is room and reason to look at government intervention, management, and "protection" with a critical eye.

In this book, we use OYE, and the network of social programs in which it was suspended, as a case study of the specific political purpose served by intervention. When we say "intervention," we mean *any of the myriad ways in which dominant institutions – assemblages of government bodies and their agencies in health care, education, law enforcement, and social services – a) get involved in the lives of individuals with the aim of altering them, or b) intentionally "come between" the individual and events, spaces, and life stages.* By way of example, education is a form of intervention in that it is placed between the individual and the labour market. It can involve a range of smaller interventions, such as programs that target potential dropouts and provide them with counselling and intense tutoring to ensure they stay in school. Addictions programs on the street, Children's Aid services, and even social assistance for unemployed people are all interventions plainly operating in Canadian society and, indeed, across liberal capitalist countries.

As Lupton argues, intervention generally draws legitimacy from the identification of *norms*, and is part of a larger process by which "populations are surveyed, compared against norms, trained to conform with these norms and rendered productive."[7] In other words, the state's questions of how and where to intervene, what and how to manage, and who to protect and from what, are driven *and* answered by the impetus to normalize individuals and societies as a whole. The state's power to keep people and societies in line with measured norms seems to have increased substantially with the discovery of one simple concept: *risk*. Assisted by experts who map, trace, survey, and measure what goes on in the world, states and governing bodies now have at their disposal the kind of data that presumably – according to

the scientific logic that accompanies it – can help them identify the causes of a given problem, predict where that problem is likely to happen, and, in turn, work to prevent it from happening in the first place. It is this focus on risk – this trust in the accuracy of predictions, this impetus to prevent and be proactive – which ultimately lies at the heart of intervention, and which is worth questioning.

Young people like the ones we interviewed for this book are prime targets for intervention; they, like cohorts of young people before them, are present in the zeitgeist as a puzzling source of hope *and* anxiety: hope in their propensity to make historical change; anxiety that they will change too much, or do so in undesirable ways.[8] They are, now and historically, positioned in dominant discourses as malleable, as people whose importance lies mostly in their potential. The role of states, families, and dominant institutions is to meld them into the "right" kind of people. When young people appear to veer off course, interventions are ostensibly required to bring them back in line with the norm.

But when the concept of "risk" is introduced to this intervention scenario, the point of intervention shifts. If governments can predict the future – if they can identify people who are *likely* to deviate from the "normal" life trajectory on the basis of "risk factors" – they do not have to wait until young lives go astray. They can and do design interventions to deploy ever earlier, to prevent undesirable outcomes before they occur. But, alas, interventions do not always work. In the case of homeless young people, certain interventions might even backfire: for example, a recent study found that 30 to 40 percent of Canada's homeless youth had spent time in foster care or child protective services prior to losing housing.[9] The idea that human lives are predictable, and that they can be successfully corrected by outside intervention, is flawed when tested against the evidence. This idea rests on the peculiar assumption that people are neither creative nor able to circumvent efforts to change their lives from the outside. It assumes that lives unfold in a linear fashion. People are reduced, in these models, to one of two things: either they are subjects whose lives happen *to* them and are thus in need of salvation from bad lives, or they are misguided toward deviance and must be coerced or controlled back toward the norm.

Many of the forty-five young people we interviewed had experienced interventions – such as involvement with child protective services, or enrollment in alternative schools – from an early age, and all of them are targets for intervention now. Their stories, as featured in this book, highlight why risk-based, interventionist models aimed at control and correction do not work. They don't work because, contrary to the assumptions underlying intervention, people *are* creative, inventive, and reflexive (and may well need to be in order to live well). Their lives don't simply happen to them; moreover, they are at their most proud and happy when they feel as though

they have found solutions on their own. The chapters that follow reveal that these young people are most successful when they reach out for help – not necessarily when help reaches out to them. They benefit from financial assistance but are hindered by the strings that come along with it. They want to feel they have worked for their income, but they need to see the connection between effort and reward, and they need to feel they have been trusted to make good decisions about money, housing, jobs, and leisure. They recognize norms, although they contest them at times. Even when they don't contest them, their pursuit of normal life patterns is nuanced, reflexive, and context dependent.

This reality challenges the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps attitude that characterizes liberal and neoliberal understandings of equality and opportunity. It suggests that those who hold this view are out of touch with, or downright ignorant of, the structural barriers to social mobility.[10] There is no such thing as the unfettered individual pursuit of happiness. And yet even the people who have the most to gain from stripping the ideology of individual responsibility bare and exposing the structural injustices that underlie poverty and inequality – including the young people we interviewed – accept the premise that poverty is, in general, an "individual failing" and a sign of immorality. Even social workers, community workers, and advocates have been found to wrestle with this pervasive ideology as they seek ways to intervene and improve the lives of poor and homeless people.[11]

Our critique of intervention is in no way an argument for laissez-faireism or the withdrawal of state support for people in need; in fact, we argue for a more generous social support system with fewer barriers to access. But the assumptions that allow our contemporary modes of intervention to survive as legitimate tools of governing are also insufficient to capture the way the social world and individual lives work. This means there is a need for a critical exploration of the ideas of intervention and risk, along with the attendant practices of states, governing bodies, and dominant institutions. We take up this need here.

Telling Stories

There is a second need addressed by this book: the need to amplify young people's stories of everyday life on the margins – as high-school dropouts, runaways and other poor young people. This need was made very clear to us through interactions we had with colleagues, Ottawa residents, friends, and family. Their reactions to our research told us that the lives of so-called street kids are mysterious to ordinary people. It's not that the two groups never cross paths; those of us who frequent urban spaces regularly pass by the teenagers and 20-somethings who live on the street, in shelters, or in low-income housing surrounded by other poor and marginalized people. Very few passersby, however, know anything about these young people as

human beings with emotions and insecurities, desires and inhibitions, regrets and hopes, heartache and joy. We know them most often as statistics, or as aggregate groups whose presence is a problem; we know of their deviations from "normal" lives and pastimes, but not of the banal stuff of day-to-day life. Despite a societal tendency to place blame at the individual level, we are rarely compelled to think of them as individuals with multi-faceted life stories.

Our desire to counteract this tendency gave shape to our focus on stories, but the choice of a narrative, qualitative approach is also intended as a critique of overly abstract, quantitative, aggregate-level studies of young lives. We agree with sociologist Raymond Morrow's assessment of quantitative social science, now over a decade old, which states that because aggregate-level quantitative data is based on the assumption of a "population" and not "actual" social groups, the relations studied are not *social* relations between people (or even power relations), but, rather, relations between variables.[12] We think Morrow was right, even if the target of this critique is a straw man in social scientific research today, especially in youth studies. While some quantitative researchers are attuned to the need for attention to particularity and difference, and to the impossibility of grand, unifying theories or all-explaining, unfailing predictive models of social life, regression analysis and similar predictive techniques are readily used. We view a qualitative approach, with in-person, in-depth interviews, as a more humane and conscientious model of social research, especially when it comes to people who are often measured but rarely heard from in any substantial way. For this reason, the chapters in this book are continually focused on young people's stories, and we try to privilege the words and descriptions of research participants, presenting them verbatim wherever possible. To economize time and space in each chapter, we often highlight long passages from single interviews that most clearly or movingly illustrate a theme that emerged in multiple interviews. Some of the interviews are drawn on repeatedly, especially in cases where the participant gave us a lot of textual data to work with; others are more often referenced in passing, when they align with some larger theme. These interviews were the quiet ones, where stories were not shared easily, where answers were short and we had to ask many probing questions. We are satisfied that the end result does justice to all of the stories, no matter how brief they are on paper.

The Case Study

At the heart of this book is a case study of Ottawa Youth Employment, informed by in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with forty-five of its participants and target participants, and participant observation with its director and staff.[13] As a case, it is set against the particular social, economic, and political backdrop of Ottawa, Ontario, in 2008 and 2009. Ottawa

was then governed by a city council led by a mayor – Larry O'Brien – whose approach to homelessness and other social issues left much to be desired. A businessman whose own life story began in poverty, O'Brien was the CEO of a temporary employment agency before taking office. As such, he was an icon of contemporary liberal and neoliberal visions of the world; his bootstrap story is emblematic of the liberal, self-responsible individual. His company, meanwhile, profits from the unstable and precarious employment characteristic of neoliberal regimes.[14] Taken together with his public statements on homelessness – the most infamous being when he compared homeless people to pigeons – it is likely that he viewed homeless people's disadvantage as mostly self-inflicted or at least self-sustained.

Many activists and politicians in Ottawa spoke out against O'Brien's approach to the city's homeless population, but his view gained purchase in light of the overall climate of intolerance for, misunderstanding of, and abjection of people who live on the street or in low-income, high-crime areas.[15] Ottawa was, therefore, not the friendliest place for young, unemployed, or homeless people in 2008. It was also a bad time economically for young workers across the country and, indeed, the world: according to figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the period saw a "record increase" in youth unemployment rates.[16] For the people we interviewed, many of whom had dropped out of high school before finishing and were thus already at a disadvantage on the labour market, the situation was especially dire. To be chronically unemployed with less than a high-school education in the early twenty-first century means having fewer resources at one's disposal on the job market than almost any other group, and this has immense consequences for well-being. This book is, in part, a snapshot of a particular period in history and of a particular locale where the gap between people of Larry O'Brien's ilk and the people we interviewed was wider than ever.[17]

However, it is more than just a snapshot. One piece of conventional wisdom about case study research says that it is not possible to generalize from a single case. This assumption has recently come under fire, and in the growing challenge to the presumed limits of case study research, we find a foothold for our own. We see a study of OYE's specific challenges, and the daily individual and *long-durée* social struggles of its clientele, as a more-than-adequate site of empirical investigation and knowledge production. Following Bent Flyvbjerg's defence of case study research, we contend that "there does not and probably cannot exist predictive theory in social science. Social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-independent theory and, thus, has in the final instance nothing else to offer than concrete, context-dependent knowledge. And the case study is especially well suited to produce this knowledge."[18] In other words, our goal is not to produce a sweeping explanation for all of the problems of intervention, ever, because such an explanation – or a theory – is impossible and may well be

less desirable than context-dependent knowledge. Our aim, in the words of one social scientist Flyvbjerg quotes, is not to "prove anything," but rather to "learn something!"[19] Importantly, this is not to say that we have given up on an ideal; we have not replaced a lofty goal (prove something) with a mediocre, attainable one (learn something). The case study of OYE is what Flyvbjerg refers to as a "black swan" study in that it contradicts and thus falsifies widespread assumptions about how the world works, why some people are poor, why some young people are on the streets, and how they can and ought to be helped. Our findings specifically contradict the assumption that poverty is "over there in that part of the world or country," and show that homeless young people can be found in wealthy city centres and can be born and raised in high-income families. In fact, their life stories and statuses vary widely. While we attend to these differences – and "the difference difference makes" – in terms of ethnicity, gender, parenthood, and family and socio-economic background, as well as the intersections of these divisions and identities, we do not aspire to a comprehensive intersectional analysis in this book.[20] Our objective here is to foreground what the young people in this study shared: a proximity to the street, unemployment, and social assistance, and the marginalization such proximity brings. The OYE case study may not hold all of the answers, but it compels us to question the answers we – as policy-makers, social workers, academics, and ordinary people – have come to accept as fact.

And so, the forty-five life stories in this book – whether they are cited often or quietly support the authors' arguments – are important, and together they say something about homelessness, poverty, unemployment, precarious employment, and intervention in young lives in Ottawa, in Canada, and, indeed, the world over. The stories may not be timeless or universal in some measurable sense, but they do not need to be.[21]

1
Seeing Youth and Young People

This book is part of a long, diverse tradition of social scientific writing about young people, a tradition characterized by the same ambivalent investment of hope in their potential and anxiety about their power as is found in public discourses. This ambivalence about youth leads to a fascination with them on the part of different publics and professionals, and it spurs a variety of efforts to keep young people in check while also nurturing their growth. These efforts are what we will call "interventions," by which we mean *instances of external, organized, and intentional involvement in the course of individual lives, carried out with the aim of changing or ensuring a particular outcome.*

Rarely are young people allowed to grow up "naturally," without intervention on the part of generalized social institutions such as schools and medical authorities.[1] Less common, but still significant, are interventions in the lives of young people who appear to be growing up in the wrong way. Both the generalized interventions – such as the mandatory schooling and other measures applied to all young people equally – and the particular ones aimed at wayward youth require a means of distinguishing between desirable and undesirable ways of life. These distinctions rest on implicit understandings or assumptions about the kinds of societies we collectively "want" to live in, and the ideal ways each individual should contribute to that end goal.

Depicting and Dealing with Youth and Young People

Societies, especially their governing bodies and discourses, develop historically and culturally specific ways of actually articulating the difference between "good" and "bad" young people. In the recent past, the undesirable young person was commonly described using the language of "deviance" and "delinquency" – the preferred terms for young people who transgressed or differed from what was considered "normal."[2] Deviance could include, for example, alternative styles of dressing and embellishments (e.g., tattoos, piercings, torn clothing), abnormal living situations (e.g., on the street, in

rooming houses, nomadic lifestyles), or involvement with drugs and crime. The assumption was generally that *all* young people had the propensity to do abnormal or bad things, and keeping them out of such trouble was a matter of occupying their time with school and extracurricular activities, and teaching them the right kinds of values and behaviours in school and at home.[3] In the early twentieth century, the response to delinquency and deviance tended toward punishment after the fact, although then-burgeoning institutions, such as age-graded schools and extracurricular activities like Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, were geared to prevent deviant behaviour before it happened.[4]

That preventive impulse expanded and has gained significant ground in the last thirty years. Today, terms such as "at risk" have gradually superseded "delinquency" and "deviance," becoming more common in social scientific research and in institutions that deal with young people frequently. This is not to say that there has been a complete break from governing or controlling young people's behaviour through tried-and-true disciplinary practices – Canadian sociologist Rebecca Raby, for example, has explored the continuing role of reactionary "school rules" around dress and conduct.[5] But the seemingly more passive terminology of risk and resilience is meant to suggest that certain young people are more *susceptible* to causing harm, to themselves or others, through criminal or undesirable behaviour. The designation of being at risk is distanced from designations of delinquency and deviance because it seems to place blame not at the level of individual will, but at the level of attributes over which the individual has little or no control. Importantly, the "at-risk" designation justifies pre-emptive interventions, because it implies that delinquency, deviance, or undesirable life outcomes can be predicted before they happen, and can thus be prevented with the right methods.[6]

Closeness and Distance in the Research Process
In the crassest terms, the "risk" approach to interventions in young lives rests on the premise that there are "good" and "bad" young people, and "good" and "bad" ways of life. We think this binary, oppositional way of looking at young people only holds sway because scholars theorizing and inquiring about their lives usually begin from a distance. This distance is evident in terms of age, but also in terms of the scholar's chosen vantage point: researchers tend to believe that they must analyze the social world from some "Archimedean" point or "God's eye view" in order to perceive the object of inquiry impartially and in its totality.[7] The notion that such an all-seeing vantage point is achievable – or even that it exists – is challenged regularly in social scientific journals, but it remains a durable fixture in scientific research, and the youth studies literature is no exception.

And so, far from the lived realities of young people, researchers create descriptions and explanations of their lives. Templates of how they *should* be are laid over how they are, and particularities and anomalies are glossed over in an effort to bring a pattern into relief. The descriptions that result from these faraway observations do not merely remain the tête-à-tête of academics; they filter down into community-level discourse that, in turn, affects in sometimes detrimental ways the lives of young people. The impacts occur, *inter alia*, through everyday social interactions with and responses from other people, legislation and governance, societal expectations, and, most importantly for our argument, institutional interventions and social programs. For example, Canadian sociologist Gerald Cradock has shown that risk-assessment tools used by social workers in child protection interventions in British Columbia are undergirded by subjective moral values regarding "dangerous" family units.[8] While this is but one example, the impact of research and writing on the lives of young people is by no means benign; consequently, we think the study of youth must be carefully considered and constantly checked against what the people we study say and do.

This is an approach many scholars who study social life have already embraced. Some respond by giving their research subjects the chance to be researchers, or to help guide the research process.[9] In a growing number of instances, research subjects are given journals in which to reflect on their lives, video cameras to document their experiences, or venues such as focus groups in which they can analyze their experiences with others.[10] Communities are increasingly directing the research that takes place within and about them. In anthropological research, this isn't new at all – there is a long tradition of participant observation, in which researchers live in close quarters with the people and phenomena they study. But with the exception of the brilliant youth research being carried out by social scientists who spend long tracts of time in schools studying young people in that environment, the close-by researcher is not extremely common in youth studies – especially when the young people in question are not conveniently accessible through schools.

Our Kind of Closeness
In this chapter we describe an approach that we believe moves the youth researcher closer to young people in a different way. We advocate a position that engages with young people and the stories they tell about their lives, in settings where they are free to tell their stories as they see fit. We did it here with a case study, a methodological choice already recognized for its closeness.[11] We maintained closeness by sitting down with interviewees ourselves, and by using an open interview technique that encouraged *them* to tell stories and direct the flow of the interview rather than asking them

to respond to closed-ended or highly limiting questions. Interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to over an hour, depending on how long the participant could stay and how talkative they were. The more interviews we conducted, the more we came to recognize the importance of allowing or encouraging interviewees to tell us about the things that seemed important to them. Therefore, we gradually came to use only a few of our written interview guide's original 100 questions, allowing the rest to serve as prompts only if deemed appropriate (the guide is included in Appendix 2; the top priority questions are in bold).

Aside from relatively short visits to the Ottawa Youth Employment offices and around the drop-in centre, we did not have a strong observational component, like the kind carried out by qualitative researchers in schools. Thus, we are compelled to privilege the first-hand interpretations of the people we study (although we acknowledge that these are intersubjectively, mutually constructed, between each of the researchers and each of the research subjects).[12] Our method helped us discover things we might not have otherwise picked up on. In our earliest interviews, for example, we were looking for themes – family strife and marginalization at school were explicitly addressed in our original interview guide – but along the way, new themes came looking for us – like the centrality of drugs, which we embarrassingly did not allot much space to in the original guide. While we acknowledge the partiality of the stories we have been told – and the possibility that we have been lied to, or that some of the stories are the result of misinterpreted or incorrectly recalled events – we also know that first-hand observations can be just as unreliable.[13]

A Theoretical Backbone: On the Importance of Language and Lines

In putting forward an alternative approach, we rely partially on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Their piece *A Thousand Plateaus* offered us the seed ideas from which we developed an analytic for understanding the lives of young people and their so-called deviations from (and, in some cases, resistances to) dominant ways of living.[14] Especially useful are Deleuze and Guattari's inventive concepts, which we use as linguistic and analytical tools to confront and destabilize extant concepts such as "at risk," "deviant," and "normal." Words with less (or different) "baggage" and normative connotations are imperative to us, because we understand that concepts do not simply depict the world – they make it, and enable ways of inhabiting and interacting with it.[15] Thus, playing with new or different concepts, and interrogating the uses of existing ones, as we do in this book, is a crucial part of understanding how our social worlds work. We hope doing this can create less (or perhaps only differently) oppressive realities within those worlds.

Lines and Segmentarity

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari offer a *political ontology* – that is, a way of seeing the supposed "nature of things" as political – centred on segmentarity and lines. According to this ontology, social life is segmented, both spatially and socially. Spatially, for example, houses are divided up into rooms; land is segmented into cities, countries, and continents; and workspace is segmented according to the nature of the work and the operations performed in it. Socially, the world is similarly segmented into all kinds of normative binaries – dualistic oppositions of social class (bourgeoisie vs. proletariat), sex (male vs. female), age (youth vs. adulthood), and so on. We are segmented, in our languages and thoughts and laws and institutions, in a linear fashion, along *straight* lines, so in most instances, we are impelled to see people and things as one-or-the-other. We have difficulty comprehending that someone or something could be two apparently opposing things at once. Moreover, the lines we see and the binaries we believe in affect the way we act and move around in the world.[16] Young women, for example, tend to lead similar lives to one another in very important respects, which are different from the lives of older men, because of the way the lines between young and old, and men and women, hem in the range of possible actions, events, occupations, and intentions they can make, do, and have.

Of course, people do not live between the same lines from birth to death, or even from day to day or moment to moment. Rather, because a person's position in any number of dichotomies can change – when they grow older, when they gain or lose some physical or intellectual ability, when they make money or lose it all, when they walk though doors to different buildings and rooms – lives change too.[17] And we are cognizant of it, in our own lives and when looking at the lives of others. When we proceed from one segment to another, when we cross lines, something signals to us "where we are" in life in a spatial, temporal, and social way. These movements shape *who* we are.

Deleuze acknowledges this and more when he writes that lines of segmentarity are also devices of power.[18] The limits on what can be said and done on either side of a given line, in varying ways and in certain circumstances, afford considerable power to one side and deny it to the other. In all cases, limitations on people's movements are mobilized and made effective via the idea of the *norm* and the social pressure that goes along with it. In other words, what is "allowed" in a given segment of social life – such as among young boys or elderly working-class men, or within affluent southern Ontario neighbourhoods or rural Nova Scotia coal-mining towns – is not entirely enforced via law or brute force. Rather, the "code" is "fixed" by dominant understandings of appropriate and normal behaviour, propped up by the institutions and interests they serve, and contested by those they do not. And while people can and do move across lines, they cross most easily at

prescribed, encouraged, socially sanctioned crossing points – as is the case when young people reach the legal age of majority and can officially enter nightclubs and imbibe. Moreover, social and political pressure compels people to leave certain ways of being behind when they cross a line, so that 17-year-old women are reticent to play with dolls, university graduates start to shed their hand-me-down furniture, and new parents cease staying out until all hours of the night as they may have done before the children were born.

We saw the consequences of these lines in the stories our interview subjects told us. They described being punished for behaviours and styles of dress that failed to abide by the "fixed code" of the school, and yet they found recognition and acceptance using those same behaviours and styles in the "territory" of the street. They looked at their own lives and identified points where they thought they should start living by a different "code" – when they turned 18, for example, and decided to "straighten up" because that's what adults do. They recounted moments when they straddled two segments and were misunderstood because of it – as when teachers could not accept their "goth" style of dress *and* their academic success, and decided they were bad students based solely on the former.

These few examples show that segmentarity and norms are not always top-down or directly enforced by a single, definitive institution – so where *do* they come from? For our purposes, it has been helpful to see these dominant modes and lines as among the "devices of power" that Michel Foucault so effectively describes in *Discipline and Punish*.[19] Foucault helps us to imagine that lines of segmentarity and the rules that accompany them are not merely consequences of a pre-existing state apparatus (e.g., a government, the police, the courts) – that is, they are not simply imposed from "above" by those in power – but rather they inhere to all modern social relationships. They gain legitimacy and flight, they become commonsensical, and they stick around via the concept of "normal." A brief explanation of this is in order.

Norms and Normalization

In Michel Foucault's formulation, people are directed toward how to *be* (particular to their social position) through a specific kind of power – *disciplinary power* – which operates by arranging (i.e., limiting and encouraging) the movements of individuals and their experience of space and time. Crucial to the exercise of disciplinary power is the idea of the norm, which in turn depends on what Foucault calls "hierarchical observation" (for example, the "Archimedean point" we referenced earlier), "normalizing judgment" (that is, the judgmental gaze of other people), and "examination" (i.e., testing people's adherence to a given norm). This positing and reinforcing of how to be "normal," through observation, judgment, and examination, can be called *normalization*.[20]

For Foucault, and for us, the norm(al) does not exist apart from interests and power. It is not simply "out there," waiting to be taken up. Rather, it serves as a basis for shaping individuals for specific societal ends, which can only be revealed through close study.[21] But when we say "interests and power," we do not mean to imply that norms are dictated to us by political leaders and law enforcers, who then hold us to that standard by arresting us or casting us out when we transgress. This is sometimes the case, but most of the time normalization is subtler, more diffuse. We live in a historical moment where our own concerns with our own lives have become the concerns of others, not just through political and judicial agencies, but also through the religious, medical, commercial, cultural, and therapeutic institutions that advise individuals how to act and who to be.[22] Practices of governing in all of these various forms disseminate the precepts, norms, and values that, in turn, shape the behaviours of individuals in contemporary Western society, who then hold one another and themselves in line. "Normal" people are those who most clearly adhere, in terms of conduct, to the prescribed norms promulgated by pedagogical, religious, political, judicial, cultural, commercial, therapeutic, and medical institutions.[23] The "abnormal," on the other hand, is whatever is situated outside prescribed social norms. While, historically, the "abnormal" has been forbidden, cast out, ridiculed, or caged, more recently the "abnormal" is apt to be seen as something to be corrected and brought back into the fold. This, we argue, is where intervention gains its foothold. Adopting a Foucauldian view of norms as our own, we assume in this book that the normal and abnormal exist, but only insofar as they are contextual, historical *ideas* which are given substance by the prevailing interests in society at a given time.

"Normal" Youth

The idea of the norm is salient for the subject at hand because children and youth have been, since at least the eighteenth century, among the primary targets for normalization.[24] And concern about keeping young people in line burgeoned in the twentieth century: historian Cynthia Comacchio has shown, for example, how distress over the tumult and pace of change in the modern world found a convenient outlet in efforts to corral children and young people while they were still amenable to being moulded. For G. Stanley Hall, who has been called the "father of adolescence," "'knowing the true nature and needs of childhood and adolescence' was the only sure means of 'thread[ing] our way through all the mazes of culture and the distractions of modern life.'"[25] Hall's thinking, combined with a growing body of social scientific literature about youth and adolescence, preceded an explosion of regulations around young lives, all of it directed at identifying, and then dealing with, deviations from the norm. As Comacchio explains:

During the century's early years, a rising caste of modern experts articulated concepts of childhood and adolescence that would strongly influence policies of institutional age segregation and subordination. Since adolescence was the prime training grounds for citizenship, and since the wearing down of family, church, and other traditional agencies of socialization was considered the foremost of worrisome modern trends, expert direction and state involvement were entirely justified. The segmentation of the life course into self-contained stages, each critical in its own right, was part of the rationalization of modern living that encouraged new modes of social governance. In the schools, modernity's age-consciousness gave rise to universal age grading; to the development of curricula standardized to the life stage, especially in secondary schools; and to such "scientific" measuring systems for supposedly age-appropriate physical and mental development and behaviour as the intelligence quotient (IQ) testing that was widely adopted in North American classrooms by the interwar years.[26]

Whereas the focus in the eighteenth century was largely on sexuality and gender norms,[27] the normative aim in the period Comacchio describes was (and continues to be, in a certain respect) the creation of productive bodies – wage workers and workers in training – that support the demands of capitalist economies.[28] One can trace the "expert direction and state involvement" in young people's lives, organized around the "segmentation" of all people into life-course-specific categories, to our contemporary Canadian context, in which normal young people are the ones who are employed, in school, or training for a job.[29] The emphasis and the focus of intervention is on skills development, education, and wage earning, creating people who not only labour but also *consume.*

Thus the effort to shape young people in relation to prescribed norms has certainly not lost its zeal over time. Now, as in the distant past, young people are concomitantly sources of inspiration and trepidation. Manifestations of both sentiments are all around us: for one, anxieties about young people are at the centre of various intervention programs aimed at normalization. When young people appear different from whatever serves as the norm, whether because of their socio-economic background, aesthetic transgressions, or resistance to the institutions most young people inhabit, they are problematized, labelled as "deviant" or "at-risk," and subjected to various interventions aimed at bringing them back toward the norm.

But even while young people's deviations and transgressions occupy a central position in the governing psyche, the young people themselves have been and continue to be repositories of hope. UK geographer Peter Kraftl has taken the youth-as-hope motif to task, showing how children and young people are discursively conjoined, in a grandiose way, with futurity (as

the oft-heard saying goes, "children *are* the future"). There is, in fact, an unquestioned logic that young people should be associated with futurity. The pragmatic culmination of this motif and the discourses that go along with it is that attempts to identify and sketch out a concrete program for *general* social change inevitably lead to *particular* interventions in the lives of youth.[30] That is, concern over the future of a given society often directs attention to the present lives of the young people who will ostensibly "lead" that society when they become adults; in turn, young lives are micro-managed with the intention of keeping them on track toward the best possible adulthoods.

But young people, like all people who face social or political pressure to live differently, do not necessarily accept or conform to the interventions or institutional pressures that confront them. Rather, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, many young people resist, ignore, or negotiate with state interventions, dominant institutions, and – because they are not oblivious to them – the normal pathways to work. However, young people who intentionally or unintentionally deviate from the norm face varying degrees of exclusion, ranging from low-wage and precarious employment[31] and living in government-assisted housing, to chronic unemployment and homelessness. While, in a certain sense, "abnormal" young people prop up the order of things by providing an "other" against which everything else can be compared, on another level they challenge accepted classifications in society because when they speak for and about themselves, they often embody heterogeneity. That is, they refuse to be placed on either side of a line, forcing us to call those lines, and the disciplinary practices and interventions they propel, into question. This refusal to be classified, embodied in the creativity and inventiveness displayed by young people who do not obey the lines between "good" and "bad," has a name: *micropolitics*.

Micropolitics and the People in This Book

With the term "micropolitics," Deleuze and Guattari denote a politics distinct from the *macro*politics of formal political categories – such as race, class, gender – and formal political processes between and within states' judicial bodies and governments. Conceptually, micropolitics and macro-politics are distinct, but in life they overlap, so that "everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics."[32] Micropolitics, with which we are primarily concerned, is much more individual than macropolitics, although it is not wholly attributable to any one individual at a time. It involves swaying and flowing, desire and belief, things that evade capture by an overarching classification, but which nonetheless cohere into some kind of political "movement" (in the physical, not formal sense). It involves singularities (i.e., different people and interests), not

definitive interest groups, but it still has the potential to determine the success or failure of macropolitical decisions. It can be mighty, although it is often hard to notice when it's happening. It can stem from ruptures in individual lives – points where the status quo becomes untenable or undesirable, or where the norm ceases to appeal or apply. At these points of rupture, individuals are impelled to invent an original, often unpredictable way out, and the cumulative effect of these actions, often unplanned, is perceptible social change.

Micropolitics is powerful because it flows, seeps, evades capture, and eludes the established order of things. It doesn't grow and settle into patterns that can be co-opted, because it emits "existential mutations" that continuously create social heterogeneity. If micropolitical mutations appear to be co-opted, as they often are, they cease to qualify as micropolitical. These mutations, Felix Guattari contends, do not prescribe predictable solutions but rather incite individuals to experimentation, "to internally generate and direct their own projects."[33]

Given all this, governments, political parties, and politicians do not play a central role in, or represent, micropolitics (although they are certainly involved), nor does micropolitics conform to habit or law; rather, it proceeds through originality and invention.[34] Outcomes are less important in the evaluation of micropolitical acts than the conditions by which an outcome was enabled. Thus, attending to micropolitics means acknowledging the fact that "the political" is not a finished project or a static realm, because micropolitics *is* the jagged edge of politics. Based as it is in such modes of intervention as resistance, flight, and deception, the tricky part is knowing *where* micropolitics will develop.[35]

Our concern here, and the one to which our data most clearly speak, is the micropolitical movement of young people in low-income, high-crime areas.[36] We are interested in the biographical ruptures, the "existential mutations" in our interviewees – their unique ways of thinking and being – evidenced in the very specific ways they relate to, resist, and deviate from the dominant institutions in their lives and the norms in society. At the same time, we acknowledge how they seek to enter into the very traditional, "normal" working lives, despite their exclusion from such pathways at the time of the interview. We believe that their particular ways of relating to "normal" life are in themselves micropolitical insofar as they do not completely follow prescribed ways of engaging with work and education, nor do they wholly reject them or constitute something entirely abnormal. Seeing lives and biographies as neither this nor that, understanding them as multi-faceted and non-linear, requires a different way of looking at and studying life stories. We bring on one additional conceptual tool from Deleuze and Guattari's toolbox to help us do this.

Arborescent Schema versus the Rhizome

Often, when we think and speak about the world around us, we fall back on recurrent mental structures – helpful metaphors, visual representations, and convenient turns of phrase – to help us convey our ideas quickly and universally. One in particular – the "arborescent schema" – emerges as perhaps the most long-held, dominant approach and way of thinking in such areas as philosophy, psychoanalysis, social criticism, and everyday life. It is, in plain, a tree-like representation of the world, which gathers concepts and images that encourage our minds to think of the world in terms of trees and their component parts. This is the mental structure that underlies oft-heard references to "the root" of a problem or "a branch" of government, to "branching out" or "planting a seed." Deleuze and Guattari highlight its ubiquity and assert that it is one of those immutable concepts at the base of many regimes, philosophical or otherwise, and the taken-for-granted assumptions (or "doxa") they generate.

Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the arborescent schemas in philosophy and other areas and show how these foundational ideas are rarely challenged, even though they limit the manoeuvrability of thought and violently organize all subsequent lines of inquiry.[37] Like a tree, thoughts and explanations become hierarchically structured – from superior to subordinate – with the individual or particular elements being less important or valued. Unreflexive assumptions are the "trunks" we know well; branches and leaves are all of the little thoughts and conclusions that grow out of those base assumptions. The problem with arborescent thinking is that thoughts must begin from the trunk, and refer back to it; they cannot pop up elsewhere. In these tree-like closed systems, superior concepts act as defining forces, dictating the meaning of all else within the system. As a result, the manoeuvrability of thought and action is very limited – to think or do otherwise within arborescent schemas is difficult, if not impossible.[38] Polyvocality and creativity are thus hemmed in wherever they aren't entirely crushed.

Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternative: the rhizome. Counterposed to the arborescent schema, the rhizome is a grass-like form that is characterized by an elaborate root structure.[39] Instead of a single, dominant trunk, the rhizome has an underground, horizontal, tuber-like root system, which spreads and grows and develops entirely new plants. It changes shape so quickly that it can hardly be mapped.[40] Rhizomatic thoughts can go anywhere, can pop up from any point without having to grow out of a basic trunk of assumptions. But the rhizome is more than a way of visualizing thoughts. Deleuze avers that, compared to the tree, the rhizome is also a better representation of how the world works. He tells us that life is made up of particularity and uniqueness in every moment, experience, and individual,

and he urges the reader to acknowledge these differences, and to see them as part of the very structure of lived experience.[41] Having set up the distinction between the arborescent and rhizomatic schemas, we propose that the concepts can be brought to bear on the present study – and the social scientific literature and discussions of intervention to which it responds and contributes – with insightful results.

Youth-at-Risk, Trees, and Tubers

The "at-risk" and "resilience" literatures introduced earlier in this book constitute an arborescent schema. Scholarship in this area must begin from the standpoint (a problematic one, we think) that there is, in plain, something "wrong" in the lives of young people who are believed to have deviated from the normal path. This automatically, from the outset, posits a need, and prescribes specific ways, to intervene in the lives of young people in order to bring them within the normal life trajectory before they turn to ostensibly unsavoury or deviant lifestyles.

Risk-based analysis has emerged as a prime technique for identifying, problematizing, and intervening into the lives of young people whose present circumstances are statistically correlated with later bad outcomes. This method uses statistical models to identify the characteristics, events, and background variables in early life that are associated with later "problem" behaviour or "negative outcomes."[42] Risk factors might include childhood poverty, dropping out of high school, living in a rural area, being depressed, having a single mother, or being a visible minority, while "negative outcomes" have been defined in these literatures in varying ways, from decisions and life situations that are commonsensically "bad," to putatively problematic relationships with formal institutions such as schools, the judicial system, the labour market, and families.

Deleuze and Guattari's exposure of the arborescent schema alerts us to the organization of thought that makes risk-based approaches seem logical. On the one hand, we see the trunk-like configuration of the normal life course, organized from birth to death or root to tip, and all of the branch-like deviations as extra, superfluous bits, digressions from good living, needing to be tamed or lopped off. From another angle, we see the statistical models of aggregated human lives as the trunks, with their outliers and individual cases as the branches, which are part of the tree, but not a necessary part, and certainly not a starting point for research. Social inquiry into the lives of young people is overwhelmingly organized by the arborescent schema, where the basic idea of "youth" or "youth-at-risk" serves as the firmly rooted trunk from which all additional analyses shoot off, and where the normal life course is another trunk toward which all of the extraneous branches ought to be pulled.

We want to do away with the tree and see the social world we study, and the problem before us, as a rhizome. To move to a more rhizomatic onto-logical and epistemological foundation for this study, we critique and pull away from the language of "at-risk" or "resilient" youth and emphasize the vagaries of intervention in young people's lives. We do not presume that, based on their current situation, the young people we interview will neces-sarily live out some "undesirable" outcome. We begin from the micropolitical standpoint that young people (like all people) are singularities who face their common circumstances in their own way, making ostensibly good and bad decisions and dealing with fortune and misfortune, opportunities and setbacks, as all people do. Young people's individual agency in their lives – what Margaret Archer calls "making our way through the world"; the act of dealing creatively with received "constraints and enablements" – is as im-portant to us here as the structural conditions under which these daily negotiations take place.[43] Their socio-economic backgrounds and the "risks" ostensibly attached to them tell only part of their story in terms of their engagement with the various institutions that seek to set "arborescent" pathways for their "development," limiting the extent to which they branch out, and ensuring that they stay attached to the trunk of normal living.

Throughout this book, we emphasize the micropolitical ruptures in re-search subjects' lives that led them, in some cases, to be homeless and sleep-ing in shelters. From an epistemological standpoint, we move away from the quixotic quest for certainty, truth, and prediction associated with risk-based statistical analysis; instead we look for *partial truths* gained through an engagement with the stories young people told us about their lives. We opted for a close and personal engagement with young people and strove to understand where they were situated at this point in their lives. We did not try to situate their lives in relation to some external arborescent schema that prescribes where they *should* be in relation to their development, but treated their stories as rhizomes that are legitimate (albeit sometimes danger-ous, damaging, scary, and unpleasant) alternatives to, although always in conversation with, "normal" life pathways. In the next section we discuss our methodological and epistemological approach to these "rhizomatic stories."

Rhizomatic Stories
Emerging from interdisciplinary backgrounds, Belgian scholars Sermijin, Devlieger, and Loots used Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome to describe the self as a "rhizomatic story."[44] They interviewed people who had been diagnosed with psychological disorders in order to explore how those people talked about themselves. They opted, mostly unintentionally, for an unstructured interview, in which they simply asked people to start talking,

with the request "tell me more about yourself and your life today." They expected to hear "traditional" stories with beginnings, middles, and ends, but instead in many cases they heard fragmented, disjointed, nonlinear, and sometimes contradictory stories. Their research subjects entered stories in the middle, or worked backwards, or jumped back and forth between past and present without skipping a beat. Seeing what people seemed to naturally do when they were not corralled into traditional storytelling through the use of orderly, guiding questions, they argued that the rhizome (as opposed to other representations of self in the social sciences) made more sense as a "framework" for narrative research and for understanding the stories people tell about themselves. They also used rhizomatic thought to challenge the god's-eye positioning of researchers in relation to their research participants, re-positioning themselves as a crucial and undeniable part of the rhizomatic structure of participants' stories.

While we do not take up rhizomatic thought precisely as these authors do, our approach to rhizomes is similar, as is our optimism about the concept's utility for social research. Here, we use it as a political pry bar to break down the arborescent thought and frameworks supporting a great deal of youth research and, in turn, the ways in which young people and young lives are represented, judged, and understood. In line with rhizomatic thought, we experiment with various concepts to move outside the dominant narrative in the youth studies literature.

There are forty-five stories woven into this book, about the lives of forty-five markedly different people who all found themselves patronizing a youth drop-in centre in Ottawa. They are gathered here so that they can be read; they will be considered individually to try to make some sense of the biographical present in light of the biographical past, and will be considered together to spur contemplation of how they all connect to one another and into a larger story. But, in keeping with our emphasis on rhizomatic thinking, we understand that there cannot be a static view of the whole; it cannot be held together, in the manner of a quilt, forever. Rather, we know that we reached the conclusions and questions in the chapters that follow by reading our interviewees' stories in one particular way, and that there could be any number of alternative ways of imagining, articulating, and understanding the lives of the young people we spoke to, the stories they told about those lives, and the world in which those lives took place. Indeed, we came up against some very deep-rooted assumptions about youth; over and over we encountered dichotomies ordering people, places, and things; and we were nearly always hemmed in by particular definitions of "normal" and "good" applied to individual lives and social phenomena. Thus, part of our project involved deciding which assumptions, dichotomies, and judgments were helpful to our understanding, and which of them hindered it; we had to

decide which of them did justice to the people and stories in our purview, and which of them could do damage, cause pain, exacerbate conflicts, or perpetuate misunderstandings. This is how we found the concept of the rhizome, the ideas of segmentarity and lines, and the critique of normal that informs our study.