Identity: “Not Being Who I Want to Be.”

Emerging adulthood theory, as Arnett (2000) portrayed it, suggests that there is a distinct age after adolescence and before adulthood in the life course when individuals explore their identity in order to “arrive at more enduring choices in love, work and worldviews” (p. 471). Wyn (2004) suggested that “enduring choices” and stability are more challenging at every life stage in the late-modern world. Like instability, Arnett studied how it is changing, and Wyn studied how the world is changing. For street-involved youth identity is like stability—it is rarely achieved, as Wyn suggests, but it is also something they think about and strive for, as Arnett suggests. Identity exploration and “enduring choices” are more difficult for street-involved youth, in part because they do not receive help or guidance figuring out where to go and what to do.

Earlier we wrote about the difficulties that the youth in our study have accessing and maintain work. Some of these obstacles were structural but many were interpersonal and the conflicts with employers appeared rather similar to the conflicts that these young people had, and continue to have, with their parents or guardians. The most difficult to resolve were the conflicts about independence and trust. Mauricio told us about quitting his job when a new bakery owner thought that he was stealing food and would “stand there right behind me every night and watch every single move I make.” Obtaining trust from employers was difficult when the youth were very young, poor, and using substances; many of the youth in our study shared all three characteristics.

In this chapter we look more closely at identity exploration with regards to worldview and to disengagement from the street and street life, with more specifics about the experiences of disengaging from street life. We believe that this process is interpretable as a change in worldview. It was a change from a reactive need for independence and self-determination toward a greater focus or need for meaningfulness, security, and support that comes with interdependence with others and collective determination. In many ways, this process was the mirror image of the process that many of these youth went through during their separation from parents and guardians, a time when individuating themselves from their family and finding a different identity was important.

Karabanow (2009) reported that his participants attempted to “disengage” from the streets an average of six times. In earlier chapters we have described the struggles of some of our participants to disengage from the streets, including for some finding it easier to be homeless than to be under pressure to make rent payment every month. Karabanow (2009) noted that everything in their lives had to line up, or at least not get in their way: Housing, employment, educational support, romantic partnerships, addictions, and health. All of these were important matters of both youth commitment to try to make it happen, and they were important matters of social policy, which we take up in the final chapter. A failure to disengage was, of course, the other side of failure to engage the new world, on the part of the youth, but it should also be considered as a possible failure on the part of services and the community to engage young people. It is a bi-lateral process. We described the experience of Kurtis who received extensive help from the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems for kicking his addiction, but when he left the treatment programs he still did not know what to do with himself in the middle of the day. In some sense this was a failure of Kurtis to imagine other possibilities and identities, but it was also a failure of program and social policy to provide concrete opportunity. A job was his main need and hope.

Up to this point we have interpreted the experiences of street-involved youth with four of the characteristics of emerging adulthood—self-focus, instability, feeling in-between, and possibilities--and our interpretation has been often optimistic, even while acknowledging some of the real problems faced by the street-involved youth in our study. In those chapters we described how emerging adulthood was lived and how emerging adulthood themes showed themselves in youth’s lives, frequently in experiences of resilience and responsibility.

Identity exploration and accomplishment was more of a problem for street-involved youth than the other four characteristics of emerging adulthood because of its relative absence, at least in the developmental sense. It was the donut hole of development in their lives, especially while disengaging from the street. Kurtis needed something to help order his daily life; he needed a purpose. An adult or adult-like identity would have helped him move away from the street.

Our participants’ experience of the absence of identity opportunity was different from the absence of stability. The absence of identity exploration may or may not be felt, especially early in the street-involved encounter, while the absence of stability was felt daily. Youth learned to cope with stability. Later, when they began to contemplate their futures, identity issues became more prominent, but unlike stability it was difficult to create and manage for them on their own. It needed relationship and community networks where many different identities could be observed, experimented with, and developed. This is a challenge for all emerging adults; for street-involved youth in our study it was an acute problem.

<2>Pathways through Street-Involvement: A Review

Although some youth “fall into” street involvement without a plan, others come to street-involvement as a result of exploration, including identity exploration (Karabanow, 2009). They try on a street identity before leaving their guardians and a home. For a few in our study, this exploration was the cause of their street-involvement; some youth were evicted from their family home because of drug use or because they had already disengaged from family life. Then in the early years of street-involvement most youth adopted the values of the subculture and soaked up the experience of being a member of the community, and most did experience membership, inclusion, and a useful sense of what distinguished them from other people. For a time, this was their purpose and identity. The immediate tasks of managing their daily lives were enough. When the identities of the street community, informal social groups, friendship, the underground economy, and the temporary labour pool sufficed, these youth made themselves available and participated fully.

As time passed, this street community and the way of life became less satisfying and our participants began to aspire to roles, values, and opportunities that transcended their current experiences. In Chapter 6 we described this as the transition from self-focus to possibility; their aspirations moved from the present to the future, and they started to think about how to align their current lifestyle with their aspirations. As Karabanow (2009) put it, “When asked about their plans for the future, about dreams and hopes, most young people indicate a great desire to belong, have a family, find a loving partner, seek meaningful employment, accrue a safe place to live, and be part of civil society. And although their current lives are chaotic, unhealthy, and distressed, they hoped for a brighter future” (p. 19). Likewise most of our participants had simple, mainstream aspirations: a job; a clean, safe room, and someone to care for and who will care for them.

Karabanow (2009) studied successful exiting, and one of the characteristics he described was “motivation to change.” The participants in his research had to “…muster the courage to change, which tends to be heightened through increased responsibilities (such as becoming pregnant or having an intimate partner); gaining support through family and friends; having an awareness that someone cares for them; and building personal motivation and commitment toward changing one’s lifestyle” (p. 8). A provider in Karabanow’s study (2009) said: “I have seen some kids, like, it amazes me, they’ll be in it for five years and then boom, one day [they’re off], and then I always ask them what made that difference and they’re just like, “I was ready” (p. 8).

The language of identity was often central in this transition, and for street-involved youth in our study the descriptions sounded like a personal conversion experience. This is not unusual in the wider population, where youth are often described as not yet being able “discover their passions,” look “deep within themselves,” and find their “true self.” The backstop for this conversion is a context that can facilitate their hopes and aspirations: raising a child, maintaining a household, holding down a job, or access to higher education. Karabanow (2009) found that some youth choose the identity first and then worked to build their life around it, and a few participants in our study did the same through involvement in romantic partnerships and parenthood. These two identities were under their control, to some extent, although not fully, as was the case with one couple who lost their baby to child protection services.

<1>The Social Sources of Identity

This kind of advance commitment did not work with other aspects of their identities, including choosing careers, largely due to the absence of support. A reason for this is that identity, and the pathway to it, is not an individual, psychological characteristic only. "Societies clearly play an important causal role in creating and shaping identity" (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996, p. 405). Baumeister and Muraven (1996) have written extensively about the social psychology of identity and changes in the experience and acquisition of identity over the centuries; they anticipated the emerging adulthood literature about identity in this respect:

...the burden of creating the adult identity now falls most heavily on adolescents, because most major life decisions can be postponed until adolescence, and adolescence does not fully end until the basic parameters of identity are in place. The combination of having a broad range of choices without having a clear basis for making them renders adolescence now especially difficult to negotiate." (p. 407)

If other young people have troubles with "a clear basis for making [decisions]," as Baumeister and Muraven (1996) argued, street-involved youth had even less help than others. They faced adult decisions without secure anchors in social contexts—relational, educational, vocational, and family--that for most others provided a course of action and a frame of reference for knowing where to begin.

Baumeister and Muraven (1996) noted that adolescent misbehavior was an old problem but the adolescent identity crisis was a consequence of the modern world which provided too few firm reference points for identity. Baumeister and Muraven called this the "value gap." For example, in Western countries religion is less influential; almost all the major historical sources of identity are weaker. Following several sociologists (e.g. Lasch, 1977, 1978; Rodgers, 1978; Sennett, 1974), Baumeister and Muraven stated that the "self" was increasingly taking on the role of a value base; individuals were expected to find in themselves guidance about what is important. Street youth are expected to find in themselves “motivation to change.”

These developments have consequences, according to Baumeister and Muraven: One is "[t]he enhanced value of domesticity," including marital love, privacy for the nuclear family, and especially parenthood.... " There is considerable pressure to find meaning in these activities, beyond being responsible. Another is that there is more pressure on individuals to find meaning in the remaining adult roles that are widely accepted, especially work; "... people work as a means of cultivating, providing for, and glorifying the self.... [Work] is done for the sake of identity-building....for modern adolescents...the need to find meaning for their self in work may be heightened and any task that does not help to support this goal may ultimately be rejected" (p. 411). Street-involved youth had trouble in this regard, and this trouble was not of their own making. They had trouble getting access to work that paid enough to live on, and they had trouble gaining access to work or apprenticeship-training programs that provided access to meaningful identities.

Before we describe some street-involved experiences of identity—and its absence—we return to Baumeister for a description of what identity accomplishes in one’s life, and we quickly summarize Baumeister’s history of adolescence and youth-hood. These are useful for understanding the existential experience of others, like the street-involved.

<1>What Does Identity Accomplish in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood?

Baumeister (1986) described a model of identity derived from contemporary social psychological research and from historical sources. He separated identity into a) defining criteria, b) functional aspects, and c) self-definitional processes. The defining criteria were continuity and differentiation. Identity links the past, present, and future. It also differentiates groups and individuals from each other. Identity’s functions are to help make choices, facilitate relationships, and provide strength and resilience. The self-definitional processes of identity are the means by which we come to answer the question, “Who am I,” either assigned/ascribed or acquired by some degree of choice and difficulty. We define ourselves by choices that transform, like parenthood; by achievements that are hierarchical, like wealth; by choices that that define a territory and rule out other options, like political affiliation, and; by choices that require choosing criteria first, like mate and career. The evolution of the idea of identity in western societies was closely connected to adolescence, of course, with Erikson (1950) probably being the most famous theorist of identity and adolescence. The experience of adolescence and early adulthood also changed over the centuries. Next we discuss the experience of and positioning of street-involved youth in light of this history.

<2>How has Adolescence Changed?

In the Western world prior to the 19th century, teenagers were “semi-independent” (Kett, 1977). They were not actively supervised by parents; many of them having been fostered out, apprenticed, or sent away to work. Young people did not have a lot of power to choose their careers, their mates, or their identities, most of which were selected and organized by their guardians. Their main responsibilities were to prepare for their adult role, often through apprenticeships, and to wait for adult career opportunities to become available. In their daily life they were relatively independent, more so than now, but there were only a small number of options available.

Toward the end of the 19th century this social organization of work began to turn upside down. With the expansion of white collar work, more youth were now sent to school for vocationally non-specific education. There were more choices of career as a result of education, though less guidance about which career to choose. Fewer youth were sent away for work, and in white collar families at least, parents were responsible for them into early adulthood. “Identity became something chosen by the adolescent rather than arranged by parental decision and influence within a context of limited options” (Baumeister, 1986, p. 105). At the same time children were staying longer in the family home the big decisions of life course, like mate and career, were becoming more egalitarian and more under the control of youth. Parents have short-term power but far less long-term power, even as there is more pressure on them.

Street-involved youth in Canada are living in a world today where the one of the most important goals of our society is to provide opportunities to everyone. Unfortunately, these street involved youth cannot avail themselves of the opportunities available to others who enter their emergent adulthood stage at a later age. They are without the long-term family support and commitment provided to other youth, and they are living in the pre-19th century world of semi-independence without the societal connections that pre-19th century youth acquired through fostering, apprenticeship, and education. Like the pre-19th century youth, they have semi-independence in their daily life including choosing their street-involved friends and lifestyle; they control the conditions of their self-employment as panhandlers or drug dealers; they choose between the limited options about where to sleep; they choose whether to go to school or not; they manage their own health more so than most other young people. Like other post-19th century youth, including contemporary emerging adults, there is an expectation that they will choose an educational pathway, a career, romantic partners, and values and ideologies. A feature of emerging adulthood is that there are a lot of decisions and fewer definitive criteria.

Without these supports street-involved youth have trouble with all of the components of identity identified by Baumeister, including the criteria, the functional aspects, and the self-definitional processes. All of these identity components assume access to at least some of the social contexts of identity development such as geography, religion, romantic partnership, employment, social rank, gender, age, or character. Josie, Celia, and Matthew illustrate different experiences of these challenges with accessing identity. Josie experienced a gap between who she wanted to be and who she was that she attributed to the characteristics of her family. For Celia identity was almost completely missing, at least as a language, as a contributor to her life, or as a motivator. In contrast, Matthew’s entire street-involved experience and his movement away from it was driven by a strong sense of identity, value, and ideology that guided most of his life decisions.

<2>Josie

During her childhood Josie described her primary problem as “not being who I wanted to be.” Part of that problem was her parents. She had come to distrust her mother’s character. She did not live with her mother after age nine, splitting her time between foster care and her father. It did not go very well with her overbearing father. She still felt considerable pain about the family life of her childhood; talking about it during interviews brought tears to her eyes. The trouble was severe enough that she was in temporary foster care occasionally as a child, and was not now willing to live with either of her parents. The anxiety and depression of childhood contrasted with her dreams of wanting to live freely and playfully with people who did not care how she dressed or acted. She seemed to ache for that way of life.

Despite past pain and mistrust, she still loved her mother and had occasional contact with her. She also spent time in the care of her older sibling, frequently eating meals together. Still, at the time of the first interview, at age 16, she lived in a tent with friends. The local services for street-involved youth like her, especially the Alliance Club and the food programs, were important, and she was still hanging out with supportive and caring street friends. Many of them were selling drugs to get by. At first she declined doing so herself but soon she ran out of money and started selling again. She was a bit lonely but said that she was happy. She frequently applied for different jobs but without success. Many of her friends were having the same problem.

Even while homeless she was still attending school and had managed to complete ninth grade. Completing another year of school was a renewed commitment; until recently she had been regularly skipping school. She liked the structure that school provided, and she wished she had a job so that she could have even more structure. One reason was that Josie had a drug use “issue;” she did not describe it as an addiction. She was occasionally using ecstacy, mushrooms, and marijuana, though at one point it was enough of a problem that she called it “doing some silly things” that were in the way of keeping up in school. Keeping busy seemed to help, and she also mentioned that it was important for her to work on commitment, what she called “the big C.”

A few months later she had received some good news. She was approved for a Youth Agreement, an independent living program; there would now be some money for an apartment and food. This meant a bit more financial security and independence, though the amount provided was not very much in an expensive city like Victoria. This did not lead to a corresponding sense of psychological security about who she was and what she was about, because the next year she described herself as “almost confused sometimes about all that, like what’s going on, for me….confused like with my friends, what I am doing and like, I don’t know, just everything.” She had been hanging out more with her boyfriend and less with her friends, but she missed her friends. Spending time with her boyfriend had “made me realize [some things] about them, and like also just hanging out with them and like the things that maybe they talk about that I don’t like or like the things they do, I don’t know. It’s like there’s something there that’s just not going.” She had also been increasingly lonely, in part because she lived alone in the apartment. Her boyfriend worked a lot and was absent much of the time. She had not been talking to her friends, and her mother had “become crazy and stopped talking to me.” She was still earning quite a bit of money from theft but had cut way back on recreational drug use because, she said, she did not want to jeopardize her Youth Agreement.

The next year Josie had finally obtained a job working the counter of a fast food restaurant and said she was happy about that, in part because it allowed her to quit working in the underground economy. But she broke with her boyfriend, formerly a key source of support. She was too busy, between school and work, and the relationship had become stressful rather than supportive. She also transferred high schools and lost some social support from her non-street friends who remained at the previous school. Yet she was hopeful about new friends at the new school.

Josie was a success story: She managed to cope with complicated parents who were not helpful. She re-committed to attending school while being homeless, and she was making progress in school. She liked school and reported good relationships with teachers. She advocated for herself to get access to Ministry services. She was able to move from supporting herself through the underground economy to supporting herself with formal economy work and money from the Youth Agreement. She seemed to be making wise decisions about friendship, and she maintained relationships with her siblings while all of this was going on. This is the beginning of a young adult life.

Also in her story are elements of the contemporary experience of identity, compressed into a street-engaged life. Josie was independent of her family at a young age, but neither her parents nor foster care provided assistance with finding a place for her in the labour force, in the community, or in the education system. Josie found temporary identities in the street-community, and little help planning for and entering adult roles. Josie would have benefitted from more support to find order in her living situation and be able to earn her living and prepare for adult life. She managed to find and maintain a place in the school system, but it was an individual success achieved without much help from anyone else. Like modern young people, Josie yearned for affection, acceptance, and intimacy from her parents, as is now the normative expectation, but Josie said she felt that her parents were too busy, pre-occupied, and perhaps not able to do so. Like many other adolescents and emerging adults who lack family support, Josie was thrown onto her own resources, including her own resources for identity.

As noted above, one benefit of the modern world is that is provides young people greater freedom to choose their identities. The street-involved youth in our study had much freedom but fewer ways to exercise that freedom, especially in relationship to identity. If identity requires continuity and differentiation, a street identity provides differentiation from others, and within the street community there are hierarchies, including between youth who manage life well and those who do not. Josie struggled to gain access to employment, and when she finally succeeded, the income and structure it provided was gratifying. Absent other identities work may be elevated as an identity source, and in Josie’s case, it was elevated beyond the importance and skill of working the fast food counter.

Friendship and social support are another source of belonging and identity that in contemporary society have become detached from wider contexts and more individualized. Friends have to be recruited and earned rather than being a “given.” The transition away from street friends was complicated for Josie and many street-involved youth, though Josie was more successful and fortunate than most street-involved youth in that she acquired friends at school, a stable and secure identity context. However, the majority of middle-class youth have access to youth sports, arts and cultural experiences, religious youth groups, a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, as well as extensive informal opportunities (e.g., neighbourhood friendship networks, online gaming). In short, Josie and street-involved youth like her have limited identity resources, even if she was making the best of them. The process of acquiring non-street friends in places like school may seem ordinary, but most street-involved youth had significant trouble earlier in life in these contexts, especially school, and making non-street friends is an important accomplishment and a complicated challenge.

<2>Celia

While Josie named identity as a problem early on, “Not being who I wanted to be,” Celia did not seem to reflect much on her identity, and it did not come up as a theme or issue in her past, present, or future. Life was a series of activities and experiences, especially experiences that helped her get through. For her substance use was one of those experiences, especially alcohol. For youth like her the social experience of using substances with friends was part of their street identity. Addiction too can be an identity, though Celia did not describe herself or her experience of using in these ways. Certainly she had an addiction, especially when she was living on the street. Celia’s perception of her identity was a mystery. We learned about experiences and things that happened to her: She went to school, she had friends, and she had a family with caring parents. We did not learn much about what they meant to her, where and with whom she felt she belonged, and whether they had a lasting impact on her life.

Celia lived with her parents up to age 15; from ages 15 to 17 everything was turned upside down. It was difficult for Celia to explain causes and consequences in her life, other than saying that she was “stupid.” She did not blame her parents for her problem, describing them as kind and caring. She described herself as having been an angry child, but she did not verbalize why. When she stopped going to school, the justification was that it was “beautiful outside.” On a lark she took off with an acquaintance to visit Vancouver, and she did not come back for a few weeks.

When things went bad, they were very bad. During that first year away from home she attempted suicide, spent time in a psychiatric ward, group home, foster home, with a boyfriend, with friends, and also on the street. Over the two- to three-year span of living away from home she tried many drugs, drank alcohol, had a troublesome boyfriend, had sex in exchange for places to stay and in exchange for drugs. She did not know how many times she exchanged sex for drugs, because she was so frequently high. She was arrested 25 times for shoplifting and picked up by the police as a runaway. Frequently she stole from cars, and she sold drugs, making about $200 a week. She used all of the shelters over this time, and surmised she spent about 60 nights in them, mainly in order to take a break from street life.

At the time we met her Celia had returned to living with her parents; this was a relief to her, though not necessarily a change in intensity. The day before she had been in a fight on the street and had a newly earned black eye. Without telling Celia, a friend stole a purse while they were in a restaurant. The victim of the theft found them and beat them. In other respects things were better. She had returned to her regular school, and she liked her friends there. The schoolwork was a struggle; she was a grade behind her age mates, and she thought some of her classes were boring and some of the teachers capricious. She was failing science yet remained optimistic about school. She was getting re-acquainted with her parents, and she said her father was her first choice of help in a crisis. The data about her emotional life from this point through the next two years was contradictory. At every interview she reported being happy and hopeful, with few emotional complications, insecurities, or fears, while also being honest about needing a crutch, especially alcohol. Later she sought help for depression and was on anti-depressants.

Celia began babysitting for cash, about 20 hours per week at $5 an hour. She thought the kids were brats and she resented the low pay. The parents thought she was a good babysitter, and she also cooked and cleaned; Celia too thought she was good at the job. She was also panhandling a little bit, making about $10 a week. She was using the money for alcohol, mainly, and she drank with her street friends almost every day. Her parents knew about her drinking, and they helped her when she was in trouble, such as picking her up from the hospital and dealing with the police after the fight. Through street friends she still had access to recreational drugs, including hallucinogens, marijuana, and cocaine, and she used them occasionally. Her friends were making money from panhandling, theft, and selling drugs, like her.

A year later Celia had completed another year of school, and she had cut back on substance use. She quit selling drugs, because she did not want to go to jail; many of her friends were still involved, and she was making a small amount of money from theft. She reported being happy and hopeful, with few emotional problems. The new year had brought a new attitude about teachers: They were now “fun.”

Not everything was rosy. Celia was still drinking every day, and she was stubborn about its meaning in her life. She and her mother were fighting about privacy issues. It seemed to be a clash between her street independence and her mother’s understandable worry about Celia getting into trouble. A little later Celia started using ketamine frequently and was spending almost $300 a month on drugs. She was also on an anti-depressant and this was the first time she reported getting treatment for depression. Then she started attending school again and thought it was important, “Just so I can graduate and all that crap.” She was in grade 12, and she had finally been able to find a regular job, at McDonalds. For the first time all of her income was from a straight job.

The next year some things had changed for Celia but other things remained the same, especially the mix of street-life and domestic, family life. She had another fight at school, with a friend, and she was suspended from one class. She had also been asked to leave home a couple times, because she was again coming home drunk. But they always took her back, and Celia was thankful for this. Even after being back at home for this long, she still had street friends, though most of them seemed to have moved on as well, with much less drug dealing and theft. Celia had always said those things were best avoided, but at this point she was trying much harder to stay away from them.

Celia made use of the health clinic, the food programs, and the shelters. Unlike Josie, Celia had a secure, backup place to live, with her parents, and not being homeless was the easy part. She survived some risky experiences, including frequently combining sex and drugs. Celia was just as determined to succeed but was less reflective. While Josie knew what she wanted from childhood and was quite emotional about how it went awry, Celia has trouble identifying a specific problem. Celia could not explain why she left home and started using so many drugs, even though she said she regretted it. She could not explain much about the meaning of her experience on the street. She was thankful for being able to return to living at home; it was a relief after the intensity of the streets, and mainly a relief rather than an experience of belonging. Like Josie, Celia recommitted to schooling, and she was personally committed though without experiencing much meaning from “all that crap.” About the future she did not have much to say; she thought she wanted to be a nurse, “or something.”

Celia had more help from services than did Josie, probably because of parental support during the acute crises around age 15--when she attempted suicide--and subsequent care in psychiatric treatment, a group home, and foster care. Along with the shelters, youth services counsellors, food programs, teachers and counsellors at school, and her parents, there was an extensive network of help, education, and care. All of these were successful at harm reduction. None of them provided access to experiences, subcultures, and networks that provided any of the structures and processes of identity development. School was the most likely option; Celia identified herself as someone who attended school but not quite as a learner, and she was not sure how to connect high school to other experiences. She also worked, and this too was something that she acquired without help from anyone. It provided money but not identity.

<2>Matthew

Like Celia, Matthew was 15 when street life began, seemingly without much drama and distress. Matthew’s world view was front and center from the beginning. Mathew was also unusual in that his world view remained relatively constant throughout our interactions with him. Matthew knew who he was and articulated hopes for the future, even if he did not know how things were going to work out. At the time we met he was short of food and using food banks; he had recently slept in the park a few nights. For income he was earning $250 a week panhandling. He dabbled in selling drugs, about $250 per week, but he had “moral concerns” about it, so he quit. He was also arrested for possession and theft, which probably made an impression.

Soon after this Matthew found a job and was able to afford rent on the salary, but then his hours were cut so he lost the apartment and was homeless again. He faced common street problems, like deciding whether to save money for rent or buy a good tent to make sleeping in the park more comfortable. He had been in a foster home, briefly, and he liked it there, but they had a 10 pm curfew, which he felt was unfair. He did not use drugs or cause problems and thought he should be trusted. So he left. While there he had been going to school, because it was required. Because it was boring, he left that too when it was no longer required. Matthew was not afraid to try things, and like other street-involved youth his independence was important.

Matthew’s stories about school are probably the best illustration of his world view, independence, and self-focus, including refusing to participate in a system that does not make sense. “I didn’t get a lot done last year. Like I learned a lot but I didn’t do a lot of work because I just find it redundant. I think it is ridiculous that we have to write down everything that we’re being told straight to our faces to prove that we learned it [even] when I got high marks on all of my tests… I didn’t do written assignments, so I failed a lot of my classes….” He was trying the online alternative school, finding that it allowed him to “challenge” (test out) courses and take short cuts to acquiring the credits.

Matthew had been attracted to “rebel” teachers:

…my English teacher liked me a lot…. It was kind of funny because she was constantly knocking the school system and saying that it was ridiculous that people had to do things like write out what they know over and over and over and over to prove that they know it. So we were on really good terms even though I was failing, which was kind of funny…. And my trades teacher was… kind of like my English teacher in the sense that he didn’t like the school system and he didn’t like… the way it was run… so he just screwed around all the time but he was a really good teacher because he really liked the topics so it was good.

Matthew was able to compromise with the world, when necessary. He described himself as a “straight-edge vegan” and as opposed to “hierarchy,” but he worked in a fast food franchise, cooking meat. To him the job was a case study in capitalist exploitation.

I *really* don’t like it at all. I’m an anti-corporatist, and it’s… a franchise and it’s like all this packaged, disgusting meat and people are like, “Oh man. The lamb. That sounds good.” And it’s like these cuts of not anything like lamb and my boss is an ass and he comes into work drunk sometimes and the owner comes into work drunk sometimes and my boss is really thick and so is…the owner a little bit. And so my boss or like the night manager just gets drunk and then we get into political debates and then he doesn’t have any opinion. He just doesn’t believe in my opinion so he just starts yelling and stuff. Yeah, I don’t like it at all.

Matthew did not mind working; what he did not like was the experience of work being reduced only to the requirement to earn money, and the ensuing loss of dignity. He knew about Karl Marx and workers’ exploitation by owners and managers. He had also found like-minded people at a local “anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial” bookstore run by volunteers, called Canvas Books. When asked why he liked them, Matthew said:

Because they don’t try and profit off of people, which I think is something that’s drilled into the heads of… most people that live in capitalist and authoritarian societies. Their life is about profit. Everybody I know downtown is constantly trying to get things from people, constantly trying to buy and sell drugs and get cigarettes off of people and make friendships so that they can make friends with someone that person knows and it’s very vicious, I think. And the people in autonomous communities have similar political and socio-political beliefs to me. And it’s a much more trusting and relaxing environment.

Matthew’s ambition was to move to a non-capitalist eco-village, located in eastern British Columbia, where residents share their possessions and food. By the fourth interview he had obtained a room in a leftist collective, a house, where residents had a “free-gan philosophy” (never paying for food), and kept things democratic and anti-hierarchical.

In the meantime, Matthew experienced typical developmental and life experiences: “Yeah, there’s a lot of really amazing things going on in my life and there are a lot of really shitty things going on in my life…” One of those things was his relationship with his girlfriend. It was good for quite some time, but over the next couple years he was increasingly unhappy about it while still being emotionally attached. Because of it he felt more and more lonely. The relationship with his girlfriend continued to be a problem and became more prominent in interviews than his political views, and he used the same analytic skills. Matthew related:

Being that I’m a teenager, you know, relationship stuff is ridiculous. Nobody knows what they want and that sort of thing. So my “not partner,” currently, goes through phases of like being extremely in love with me and wanting to spend her life with me and not wanting to be with me at all. And sleeping with tools and stuff, so, I don’t know…. So it’s like, for a while she was just like “I’m not in love with you and can never be in love with you again” and all this stuff and “I want to be your friend” and like every time we would hang out, we would end up getting way closer than friends, and I was like “I think there needs to be a line here” but she can’t really draw one, and I can’t really draw one. And then like, she’ll go off and sleep with some asshole that she fell in love with for five minutes, and like come back to me and apologize and be with me for like a week, and then do the same thing…. So it’s like largely my fault that I keep caving with it, I guess. But, I don’t know. It’s kind of weird.

At the last interview, Matthew had a new job, fundraising for Doctors Without Borders, and he was enthused. He had gone back to foster care, to the same home as before. He had set aside or forgotten his earlier complaints about the restrictions in this foster home, and this home provided far more freedom and less pressure than any other foster home.

Matthew was an unusual person compared to other street-involved youth and also to most youth his age. He was explicit in his principles and the risks he took were for the sake of his principles as well as his independence. His commitment to his values and ideology guided his major choices and his daily life, and he was sophisticated enough to compromise when necessary while also having a sense of humor about himself. These values connected him to other people; Matthew knew to what and to whom he belonged. These values provided continuity over the years of his street-involvement, and they differentiated him from his family, other street-involved youth, and society. They helped him interpret the world, knowing what to be against but also knowing what he favoured.

<1>Summary

Karabanow (2009) argued that his participants “spoke of *choosing* street life. They did not describe themselves as passive actors or victims of circumstance; rather, they talked about their own involvement in the street engagement process. Some spoke about being equally responsible for problematic family or child welfare experiences, whereas others saw the street as the only option when home or child welfare settings became unbearable. Still others equated street life with a “time-out” period to reflect on their particular situation while experiencing camaraderie with other youth in similar situations” (p. 5). We have suggested throughout this book that our participants share these same views of their own agency, even while having abuse and neglect in their backgrounds and limited supports up to the present. This agency and sense of responsibility for and about themselves served them well throughout their street-involved years.

Much of the optimistic and complimentary spirit of our participants had to do with their competence and savvy. We suggested explicitly and implicitly that there are developmental opportunities in these experiences, especially early encounters with adult and adult-like responsibilities and decisions. Other researchers have not been so enthusiastic. Bender et al. (2014), for example, argued that housed youth are “engaging in normative developmental tasks, whereas homeless youth are focused on safety and survival.” We would modify this statement. For example, street-involved youth’s sense of responsibility was a developmental outcome under the conditions of non-normative developmental tasks. Bender et al.’s distinction did succinctly clarify an important difference between homeless or street-involved youth and others, but the distinction might not be only about what homeless youth were missing. We have suggested that this focus on safety and survival was also an early encounter with emerging adulthood. We would not characterize these experiences as “normative” but they were developmental. We are re-conceiving street-involvement as a kind of emerging adulthood, and the trajectory of most of their lives was toward adult-hood, understood in emerging adult terms as making independent decisions, taking responsibility, and increasing financial self-sufficiency, as described by Arnett.

Bender et al’s contrast between the experience of homeless youth and others might be used differently to think about what both mainstream youth and homeless/street-involved youth gained and lost on route to adult identities and maturity. In regard to maturity, emerging adulthood theory is short on specifics about what it means, and the goal of young adulthood toward which emerging adulthood leads is somewhat tepid, a portrait of adult-like rather than adult. Similarly, our portrait of street-involved youth portrayed their adoption of and movement toward young adulthood, but we focused on their accomplishments. Adult and adult-like are not quite the same thing as maturity.

What maturity and adult identities are about is probably not clear to any young person, and it was especially obscure for street-involved youth. This is an opportunity to consider what a non-normative developmental pathway might look like. If young people are making courageous, responsible decisions to leave difficult home situations at young ages, it is not that helpful to only mourn what they are losing. Our current focus on harm reduction and safety is valid. But it might also be helpful to consider the developmental opportunity, even if it is not normative. And the presence or absence of developmental opportunities might be a good place to start.

Cheung, Little and Sternberg (2005) critiqued juvenile justice services in the United States from the point of view of the requirements for achieving “psychosocial maturity.” They reviewed three issues: “1) how juvenile justice programming influences individuals’ ability to complete developmental tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood; 2) whether young offenders possess risk factors that can interfere with psychosocial development during the transition to adulthood; and 3) whether justice system responses expose individuals to harmful experiences that compromise their chances of becoming successful adults (p. 79).

Developmental tasks are not on the radar of services for street-involved youth in most jurisdictions, though such “tasks” are not a new idea. For example, de Oleivera (2001) studied the subculture of street youth in Sao Paulo, Brazil and how youth workers engaged young people in democratic social organization, group work, and political activities. These efforts were on the streets as a preparatory step, and the missing part of the equation was inclusion and integration. Cheung and Sternberg (2005) suggest that we should similarly refocus efforts towards development with more long-term assistance with social inclusion; this kind of assistance may help them move beyond street-involvement.

This also means moving beyond harm reduction. Most harm reduction programs are by definition focussed on the harm that is related to a single or small number of risk activities. These programs are very important in the current context where universal and long term governmental programs have become fewer and fewer. Yet harm reduction services are not developmental and progressive. They reduce the harm of some of the activities that some street involved young people frequently engage in and street-youth have difficult moving on from them.

With regard to services for street-involved youth, we might consider whether and how being street-involved influences the possibilities of completing developmental tasks, what risks are present that interfere with psychosocial development, and whether service responses interfere or hinder moving on to successful maturity, following Cheung and Sternberg (2005). They describe three domains of psychosocial maturity in this regard: Mastery and competence, interpersonal relationships and social functioning, and self-definition and self-governance.

Ideally, during late adolescence and early childhood individuals should have the opportunity to participate in social settings that help them to carve out their personal identities, decide what values and activities are important to them, and develop the interpersonal, educational, and occupational skills needed to achieve their goals as adults. Social contexts including the family, peer group, school, and workplace serve as important learning environments because they provide individuals with opportunities and resources that prepare them to take on mature roles and responsibilities. Making a successful transition to adulthood is a process that, under the best of circumstances, is promoted by the support and protection of adults, a sense of purposefulness about the future, and the freedom to explore possible life directions in the realms of family, education, work, love, and friendship (p. 78).

From these we can begin to describe some characteristics of the street-involved pathway and the potential and challenges. We have described the experience of separation from family as diverse. For a few it is an escape from responsibility and from growing up, sometimes for the simple freedom to use drugs without restriction, and these youth often later come to recognize their immaturity, and a few of these youth later return home. For a small number leaving home is an adventure in exercising some freedom. For many others leaving home is characterized by some bravery, an existential choice to be different than one’s parents and family, and a bit of a leap of faith into the unknown. For these latter two groups especially we suggested that these choices might not best be characterized by risk, breakdown, and immaturity but as choices more typical of emerging and young adults, under difficult conditions. We might compare their choices to those of adults in destructive and violent romantic relationships who make choices under similarly difficult circumstances. Further, without exception the educational experiences of these youth were stressful and lonely.

Becoming independent, finding a community on the street, finding an income source, and managing one’s health and health care are tasks of adulthood. They do not guarantee maturity, psychosocial or otherwise, but they do provide identities, immediate feedback on decisions, and adult-like experiences of independence. These are educational, in an experiential sense, even if some of these experiences will make most adults wince. Practically, they are exercising the prerogatives of emerging adulthood, on the margins of social institutions, and occasionally in opposition to social institutions. After a period of time, most youth begin to experience some restlessness with the immediacy of street life, and they begin to think about their longer-term future possibilities. The practical hopes are for a stable income and residence, even if modest.

Most of the support that young people receive at this point is aimed at providing shelter, food, and preventive health care, along with some counselling and safe spaces. These are rightly aimed at protecting youth from the worst consequences of being homeless, and in some case from the consequences of being young. These are important and necessary services, but perhaps they are not sufficient. There may be a developmental mismatch between youth readiness and opportunities that are available. None of these services responds to the psychosocial and existential choices these young people have made, to the emerging adult and adult-like interests they have in creating a new life, to the desire for new identities. They chose a new way of life; the developmental opportunities for trying out new identities are usually limited, if returning to one’s own family is not possible. Employment and education are challenging, although a few do manage to keep or maintain access. No one participated in the youth program of a voluntary youth organization, and only Matthew mentioned any other social group that was not focused only on street youth. Only one young person mentioned participating in religion. The most promising opportunity might have been the small number of youth who had connections to the Native Friendship Centre.

If Cheung and Sternberg (2005) are correct that psychosocial maturity is related to mastery and competence, interpersonal relationships and social functioning, and self-definition and self-governance, for street-involved youth the developmental pathways for participating in these are missing. As a consequence, so are opportunities to try on and explore adult identities. We can imagine how to provide young teenagers concrete opportunities in employment, in education, and in community life without also trying to remove their independence. Opportunities like these require social policy supports, and we turn those considerations in the next chapter.

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