

Vanessa Oliver (2013)

Healing Home: Health and Homelessness in the Life Stories of Young Women.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.281, \$29.95.

Vanessa Oliver's *Healing Home* is an in-depth, qualitative exploration into the health of young women experiencing homelessness in the Toronto area. This book aims to explore issues related to the health of the young women, specifically their health status, their own interpretations of their health needs, and importantly, their interactions with healthcare service providers. Employing a narratological or 'storytelling' approach in presenting the women's lives, Oliver integrates the narrative analysis of the young women with wider literature on homelessness, sociological insights, and social policy. The primary dataset of the study is drawn from eight in-depth, life history interviews with young women between 15 and 21 years of age – all of whom were residing in, or in contact with, a Toronto shelter for young women. While existing research on homelessness and health have been inclined to emerge from the biomedical and psychology disciplines (which tend to favour quantitative measurements), Oliver's innovative blend of narrative and sociological exploration provides a compelling insight into homeless women's own interpretations of their situation. This book is a particularly important contribution to knowledge given that the needs of homeless women, and in particular young women, are considered by many researchers to be largely overlooked in research and policy planning (Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Baptista, 2010).

The study is guided by a number of different perspectives and approaches. Feminist theory and feminist political economy, narrative theory, insights related to subjective encounters with social structures, and considerations of neoliberalism and the social welfare state are incorporated in Oliver's analysis. The combined theoretical approaches attempt to expose the multitude of social, cultural and economic constraints (some of which are competing or contradictory), whilst also revealing how women continually shape their own lives as distinct individuals. Oliver continually challenges wider discourses of pathologising poverty and homelessness, and seeks to contextualise the women's narratives in a particular time (age, life course stage, or social and historical context), and in a particular space (socioeconomic contexts, differentiated access to resources, etc.). The prevailing and often

compounding tiers of exclusion such as age, race, class, and sexual orientation that can impact on the women's access to healthcare and housing are also discussed. Further, constructions of gender are explored by drawing upon literature pertaining to gender and homelessness, the 'home' vis-à-vis the role of women, gender performances in the context of street life, and female sexuality. Thus, the reader is offered a multidimensional understanding of "the ways in which relations of gender and power are fundamental to the understanding and practices of health access, health delivery, and health-seeking behaviours of homeless youth" (p.4).

Central to *Healing Home* is the voice of the women themselves. The opening findings chapter offers eight detailed life history narratives of each of the female research participants in which their 'self-stories' are recounted faithfully and sensitively to the reader. Common patterns emerge across the dataset, such as early childhood trauma or abuse, family violence or neglect, enduring poverty, failures in the state care system, mental health problems, self-harm, problematic alcohol or drug use, unstable living situations, or sexual exploitation. Such themes echo much of the existing literature on homeless women (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al*, 2007; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Through these accounts, Oliver provides a textured and multi-layered understanding of the women's lives in which we can begin to grasp their worlds and their needs. It reveals the extent of the deep structural inequalities persisting across the life course, and the way in which the women negotiated and navigated such constraints as they carve out their future. It is through the women's opinions, desires, and ambitions within their narratives that they are, in basic terms, "ordinary young women living under extraordinary circumstances" (p.44). In other words, their homelessness is only one aspect of their unfolding lives and labels such as 'homeless' can eclipse our understanding of their needs.

Following from this, the pertinent health issues for the women interviewed – specifically mental and sexual health issues – are discussed in detail. Depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), histories of violence or abuse, and problematic drug or alcohol problems featured prominently across their narratives. Other issues relating to body image and physical appearance were seen to cause additional stress and anxiety to existing feelings of stigma relating to their homelessness. Analysis of sexual and reproductive health among the women demonstrated how they did not have an appropriate outlet within which they could discuss normal sexual health questions, worries, or curiosities. Their precarious living situation was seen to further exacerbate their health needs and also impeded their ability to seek help. In situations where women did pursue help for their health issues, many reported negative encounters or experiences. The author concludes that there needs to be "a shift away from traditional models of service delivery and towards creative thinking

that takes health care out of clinical spaces and into streets and shelters” (p.200). The young women need to be afforded greater influence on the design and delivery of health services, Oliver argues, not only as a way of providing more appropriate and sensitive service provision, but crucially, to foster a sense of belonging, of importance, and of empowerment among this marginalised group.

There were some methodological limitations in relation to the research design and recruitment of participants. Notwithstanding the merits of in-depth qualitative research with small research samples, the author’s continuous references to the same eight women as a way of illustrating the arguments throughout the discussion chapters felt limited at times. As such, a larger sample size, longitudinal follow-up interviews, or perhaps triangulation of the existing data with systematic ethnographic observation, for example, would have enriched the discussion even further. It would have been particularly valuable to recruit more than just one migrant woman (i.e. a woman born outside Canada), as it would have expanded our knowledge of the health and housing needs of migrant women in an economically developed nation-state; an area of enquiry which is lacking (Mayock *et al*, 2012). Furthermore, given that the study’s sample was recruited through one single service in Toronto, the research would also have benefited by diversifying the sites of recruitment to capture a broader range of service experiences.

Overall, however, the strengths of Vanessa Oliver’s book are substantial. It succeeds in capturing the women’s heterogeneity, resilience, agency and even their personalities, whilst, at the same time, always remaining rooted in the wider social, economic and cultural landscape. To achieve this – as any researcher in the field of homelessness research is aware – is no easy feat due to the profound complexities inherent within this area of enquiry. The result is a well-developed, theoretically-robust set of arguments, which, through its story-telling style of presentation, makes it captivating and highly readable for both the academic and non-academic reader.

► References

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