

Marni finkelstein

Sociology, Violence



In this critical review of Marni Finkelstein's ethnography "With No Direction Home: Homeless Youth on the Road and in the Streets" I will analyze and evaluate some of the strategies and methods used by this author. One primary issue I will discuss is the sample population. Finkelstein may have set the population limitations to strictly for this ethnography. Her limited observation location and time is also a major issue. She chose to study a transient population that, very likely, primarily comes out at night. Yet, she limited herself to one primary location and she only went there in the daytime.

I will discuss the lack of follow up to the individual interviews as well. While she discovered some fascinating information about this subculture, she did not find what she stated she initially set out to find. Finkelstein's goal was to study "gutterpunks" (Finkelstein, 2005), but what she actually studied were the substance abusing homeless youth of Tompkins Square Park. In her original hypothesis she wanted to learn about "alternative youth subcultures, especially those revolving around music" (Finkelstein, 2005).

She does not seem to have accomplished this goal. There was little talk about music in the ethnography, on her part or the part of the kids. Was it because she found that there was no relation to music or because she did not specifically try to find youth involved with the music. It seems like she basically settled for just plain old homeless drug addict and alcoholic kids, which would be great if her goal was not more specific to finding "gutterpunks." The ethnography is also based on an extremely small sample size.

According to Finkelstein's own numbers, she only interviewed 50 youth over the period of the two summers. That seems like an extremely low number of participants for which to base an entire ethnography. I would think that over a period of two summers- let's call that 6 months- a researcher would have the opportunity to encounter hundreds of potential candidates to provide informational interviews. Part of the trouble may have been that she limited her participants ages to being between 15-20 years old.

I believe that this restriction left out a great deal of potentially vital informants and information. It may have substantially limited her population size. For example, the 25 year old, named Scratch, who had been on the streets for 10+ years, would have been a cornucopia of information. But, all she did was use him to refer her to other kids in her required age group. The street culture in Tompkins Square Park did not have age limitations. I'm not sure that Finkelstein should have either.

It's important to note that all of the kids involved were heavily dependent on drugs and alcohol. Also important to note, is that she was paying her participants. This combination may have created unintended consequences. It's possible that the kids were willing to tell vivid and imaginative stories to Finkelstein in hopes of being interviewed again and, thereby, being paid again. Many of the youth were willing to admit to prostitution in order to earn money for drugs or alcohol. Is it possible that they would prostitute lies about their own lives for the same end?

Is it possible that they never really left New York? Did they just move into shelters in the winter? It's impossible to know for sure. These kids are caught

up in the culture of lies and delusion surrounding drugs; that is to say, who says they aren't just verbally fantasizing with Finkelstein and passing it off as the truth. The location limitation was also unfavorable for this kind of ethnography. If one is going to write ethnography about a transient population, they should become somewhat transient themselves.

Traveling with the youth would necessarily be required in order to get a full picture of their culture. The stories from the kids may have been accurate and detailed, or they may have been fabricated, but, either way, it is not the same as having experienced it personally. In order to fully understand and appreciate a subsistence strategy, one must subsist from it, if only for a brief period. She might have considered a more interactive participant observation model to more fully experience their culture. Finkelstein should have gone out into the park when more kids were out and about.

She mentioned that she only went out in the daylight, " I would try to get to the field site early before the kids were either too drunk to be interviewed or completely passed out in the grass" (Finkelstein, 2005). Because these kids are alcoholics and drug addicts, it is very likely that much of their life takes place after sundown and before sun up. I imagine that they have quite a tolerance and are relatively functional for much of the early part of the evening. " Drugs and alcohol were a major part of the kid's lives" (Finkelstein, 2005).

I can certainly appreciate her concern for personal safety, but if this is the population she wanted to study she might have made more of an effort to be around when the activities were in full swing. She only mentioned being at

one party in the book. I have to believe that there were countless similar activities during her research, of which she was not a part. I have gathered from the ethnography that Finkelstein interviewed each kid only once. From that interview, she sprinkled quotes throughout the book. She mentions a few times in the book that she would interview kids and then never see them again.

For accuracy purposes, and to get an idea of the level of honesty from her informants she should have conducted multiple interviews with the same kids. This would have been more likely if she was willing to spend more time in their " natural habitat. " Follow up on the interviews with the youth should have been done. Talking with the family or schools of the kids would have added much needed detail to the ethnography. Since she was paying the kids, perhaps she could have paid more for verifiable information about their previous mainstream lives.

Then followed up on the information provided and reported her results. It would have been nice to have a section on what their families and teachers said about how the kids were before their lives on the street. Perhaps, verifying or debunking some of the information the kids told her. It's not only important that the kids are on the street, but why. What lead them there and are the youth truthful overall? It would have been interesting if Finkelstein could have interviewed ex-Tomkins Square Park kids for her book. Do they ever get out?

Do they move on to other arenas for homelessness as they age? Clearly, in Chapter 9, the kids have plans for the future. It's also clear that their plans

are of then just a shared illusion. They don't currently have the means or the wherewithal to accomplish the goals they've set out. The kids, like Jeff and Joyce, clearly have plans to buy land, but no real idea of the amount of money it requires. I am sure there are people that did grow up and out of this subculture. I would like to have heard from them on how they got out and what became of their lives.

I can't say that have the answer on how to find them either, but it would have been interesting. Finkelstein did make macro conclusions from individual or micro level research. But she does come up with some interesting information about the small group of Tompkins Square Park youth she interviewed. This should not be disregarded, as homeless youth often are. It was eye opening to peer into this culture and community. The homeless kids often had a common bond because of prior abuse. (Finkelstein, 2005) They also bonded out of shared needs.

Whether those needs be drugs, alcohol, or food, they were willing to share with those they knew were in the same situation. When they would panhandle they would pool their money with other youth. If one got some food, he or she would share it with another who was nearby. This happened specifically when Finkelstein bought some pizza for a youth named Tommy. Although he was starving himself, he effortfully walked across the street to give half of it to a girl who was panhandling. Tommy did not know the girl; he just knew they shared the common bond of being homeless.

The Tompkins Square Park youth considered themselves apart from mainstream culture. Yet, they required it for survival. If they were truly apart

from society they would have been growing or hunting for food. They would have traveled from place to place on foot. That simply did not happen. Wasting of food by mainstream society allowed them the opportunity to dumpster dive for food. Caring people would sometimes buy them food. Modern modes of transportation allowed them to travel around the country in quick fashion. The kids panhandled and begged for money.

They participated in this ethnography because they were getting paid to do it. While the youth would like to consider themselves apart from mainstream, the reality is that they are just one part of it. What one has to keep in mind always, is that these are not highly idealistic youth as much as they are kids caught in the fog of drug and alcohol addictions. From the drugs and alcohol came the extreme level of violence. These youth walked around with weapons, usually a knife or things called " smileys. " The smiley would be made from a bicycle chain which sometimes had lock on it too.

This weapon appears to have the capability of causing some pretty disfiguring injuries. These kids have no qualms about deploying these weapons. In fact it seems to be a regular event. This level of unreported violence is definitely one area where they keeping themselves separate from mainstream society. The question for me is: Are they reverting to more primitive behaviors because of the lack of civilized structure or is the alcohol and drug use the main problem. Finkelstein's ethnography is a remarkable piece of anthropological work. It s also possible to learn from some of her mistakes. She states that her objective is to study the relationship between music and this subculture of kids on the street. She never makes any further

reference to that issue. How did the music play a part in this culture? She stated that the size of the street kid population is substantial, approximately 100 million worldwide, but she only had 50 youths in her study. She interviewed them only once without any follow up with the youth themselves or their families, school, or other organizations.

Furthermore, she studied a transient population from one single location, primarily Tompkins Square Park. It would seem appropriate to have traveled with this population to get a real sense of their culture. Did they act in California as they acted in New York? Did they really travel at all? A main concern is that this work is based on personal stories from youth who are deluded by drugs and alcohol. There is no real verification of the facts presented. From these personal stories Finkelstein makes claims about all homeless youth, when she should really just be discussing Tompkins Square Park youths.