

Exchanges

Conversation with Jayne Malenfant, McGill University

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Volume 5, Number 3, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070854ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v5i3.70366>

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Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)

2368-416X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Sanz, P. (2019). Exchanges: Conversation with Jayne Malenfant, McGill University. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 5(3), 63–70.
<https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v5i3.70366>

Article abstract

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In this issue, we profile the perspectives of young scholars. Here we feature a conversation between Penelope Sanz, who recently obtained her Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Saskatchewan and who serves as the Journal's pioneering managing assistant, and Jayne Malenfant, a 2018 Pierre Elliott Trudeau Scholar, Vanier Scholar, and Ph.D. Candidate at McGill University in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education. A young engaged scholar working with the homeless in Montreal, Jayne talks about her on-going study on how homelessness impacts young people's education. She looks at the challenges of accessing educational institutional support, an issue, she says, close to her heart as she was once a homeless youth herself. She reflects on the need for academia to open more spaces for young researchers undertaking engaged scholarship to involve the homeless youths themselves in the search for solutions.



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Conversation with Jayne Malenfant, McGill University

Penelope: Can you please tell our readers about yourself, your work, and your scholarship concerning the homeless?

Jayne: Right before my 16th birthday, I was living in Saskatoon. My mom left and I ended up on my own. Two months after that I was kicked out of school. I was at one high school, and they told me to leave because I had too many absences. So, it was not that I didn't want to go to school anymore. There were simply no institutional supports that would allow me to continue being a student with unstable housing. For two years I was out of school. I tried a few options such as going to another school and doing adult education. But it was difficult to juggle housing precarity, trying to work to pay rent, and to have a safe and stable place to sleep. Nevertheless, I finished high school in Saskatoon and moved back to Ontario to do post-secondary education. Today my research looks at educational engagement and educational barriers for homeless youth. My research asks, how well-organized are educational institutions to



Jayne Malenfant
(Photo: Penelope Sanz)

support homeless young people who are unstably and precariously housed, living on the street or crashing on couches? This research is directly informed by what happened to me as a young person. I used a broad definition of what homelessness can look like for youth: there are many different ways to not have a home. I co-lead this participatory action research project with my supervisor Dr. Naomi Nichols, and we also work with four co-researchers who have experienced homelessness.

My Vanier and Pierre Elliott Trudeau scholarships have allowed me to do participatory action research, which can take a lot of time to do thoughtfully. The first two years of my PhD I had to take on several jobs, but my scholarships have allowed me to focus on my research. I also now live in the most stable housing of my life. These supports mean I can do research that is based on ongoing collaboration with community organizations, rather than just working with predetermined research questions, and popping in and out of the “field”. We are not only looking at schools, but also child welfare, criminal justice, well-being, and mental health, and how all of these systems are interconnected in the lives of young people.

Penelope: Given you experienced homelessness at a young age, how does it inform your engagements and connections with youth?

Jayne: I have a very different experience compared to many of the youth we work with. I was precariously housed. Sometimes I was in a spot with 20 people, that wasn’t necessarily safe. At times I was on a couch, that was anything but long-term. I didn’t enter the shelter system or the child welfare system. That’s been a tricky one because I’m coming in with my idea of what precarity would look like for me and it can be very different for other people. So, it has been difficult. But two things that I bring with me is relatability and “realness.” It sounds unimportant. But when we’re working together, it helps the youth. When I share parts of my own life, it makes me seem less of an expert or researcher who’s coming in to educate people about what they already know, or to collect data. They can tell that my research is intimately connected to my life and the people I love who are still experiencing homelessness. This is my passion and a matter close to my heart. This kind of passion is not always easy to find because researchers have such a history of often trying to maintain that distance, objectivity or expertise. That is something I don’t even really try to do. I am intentionally overtly political. I am very close to my research and I don’t think that I could objectively approach this. I also don’t know what it would add to the research if I did. I want to drive research that makes a change because I still see people I love losing their housing and I see how it affects them.

Penelope: Would you mind telling us about your Master’s program and how it contributed to your current research?

Jayne: I did social anthropology at York University. I originally came to the university to do

archeology. I always wanted to be like Indiana Jones, but then I realized he was not the best archaeologist for a lot of reasons. In my Master's program, I realized that I knew things that professors didn't know. I was in a class, and the teacher was talking about migration and saying that there were no transient populations in Canada. But I was aware of hobo kids when I was younger, who would ride trains out west, and migrate around Canada depending on the weather and where they were. They were often homeless youth. So, I ended up writing in my Master's thesis about anarchist punks living outside of the city in Canada, and how they've created radical networks — across vast geographic space — of knowledge-sharing on surviving in the woods or the city. As I was looking through my interviews, I realized that almost everyone I had talked to had also experienced homelessness at some point. Sometimes what led them to leave the city was that, if they weren't going to be housed anyway, they wanted to at least be in the woods where they felt they could control more things. They will not get thrown in jail or get ticketed. My Ph.D. research is based on me noticing that housing precarity was common among them.

Luckily, I got a job as a research assistant at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) at York University. I was about to quit academia then. I was finding it difficult to reconcile the things I knew in my life with official narratives and the way we are theorizing in academia. On my first day of work there, COH folks did a plain-language training telling me, "Stop writing like academics. You need to be engaging with the public." That was something the COH do well. They take research and make it available to people who are non-academics. It showed me that there are different ways of communicating your research to the broader public. That's when I realized that my research could actually be engaged scholarship, that it didn't have to be separated from my life.

Penelope: Now that you're pursuing community engagement, how do you understand your scholarship?

Jayne: That's such a huge question. One thing that I'm really excited about is that I've been trying to create a network of peers because I've seen how much value that offered to me. I'm thinking of someone I just chatted with, who is going into a Master's and has also experienced homelessness. For me to be able to guide and share what I know and say, "Oh, here's some grants and here's how this works. Here are the things that you can play with and push back against in different spaces and other things are always problematic." It's important to create a network of different scholars that can mentor each other, share research, act and think about how we can be changing the narrative. Then the homeless youth coming to know this network, and meeting other homeless youth in the university, might feel like they belong in these spaces. I am thinking of every university scrambling around diversity and hiring more Indigenous staff, or staff of colour and then miserably failing to support them. With young people who are experiencing homelessness, it also happens. Where they're asked to share their story, whether it's for research or not,

afterward, they're left on their own. So, this networking and mentorship that I'm trying to foster across Canada, I hope it will somehow provide some support, so people will stay, stick around academia.

Penelope: Have you resolved this internal conflict of being a scholar and, at the same time, an activist?

Jayne: No, no. It is every day. I know I've been thinking a lot about how we translate knowledge from my conversations with our youth researchers and the decisions we make about the research together. But then I still do the thing where I'll go to a conference and make presentations about our collaborative research. For instance, at the 2019 Social Science and Humanities Congress, I'm presenting in a different way than I think I would present if the youth researchers were with me. I've been trying to work on that. It definitely switches things up. But even within myself I find myself contributing to the very things that I'm critiquing.

Penelope: Can you expound on that?

Jayne: I think of how I write academic papers. I was recently writing about how I take field notes now, compared to how I used to do that before. I used to write in codes and hide everything because I thought I was missing a piece of the puzzle. I had to spend a lot of time with my field notes. Now working on a participatory team of six, we have to share everything very explicitly. It is part of the learning process to share my notes with the team. My supervisor shares hers. We're all thinking through things together. Such a collaborative approach means having to resolve some of that discomfort of wearing different hats, and hopefully wearing the same hat in more spaces. What has been helping me partly resolve these ethical dilemmas of how research is created, and how knowledge is created in academia is working with the youth team. Often, they will say, "Why are you worrying about this? This isn't important. What's important is that we're getting things out there in every way we can." So, while I'm having this ethical dilemma about how our research is being translated within academic spaces, I think the youth co-researchers are just excited that people — teachers, nurses, social workers, students, the public—want to hear our research team go talk to them. We have been invited into spaces to talk about our research that none of us would have had access to otherwise. People want to read about our research project in Montréal, about my doctoral work, and doing this participatory research and listening to young people.

Penelope: You mentioned about the team you are working with. Can you elaborate more on your participatory action research?

Jayne: For me participatory action research was really important. Even though I have some experiences of housing instability, I wanted to connect with youth who are also affected but might have different experiences than I do, because of their different identities. When we started in September 2018, we were supposed to hire only one youth researcher. But

we ended up hiring four youth ages between 21 and 26. The youth researchers were all connected to the organization *Le Bon Dieu dans la rue* (or *Dans la rue*), which is an organization in Montreal that provides shelter to homeless youth, and started building a relationship with them for about a year. *Dans la rue* is where we conduct our research, and it has a day centre with counsellors, front-line workers, a school, psychologists, food — all the things we often can't offer as researchers but are necessary for our co-researchers and participants to be supported. Within the first year there, we got to know each other. We also came up with a design and what the research would look like with the organization.

In September 2018 we started a long process of training in research methods. We would have five-hour meetings often one day a week. Every week we discuss: “What is this research project about, what do we want to accomplish?” Each co-researcher would share why they were interested in doing it, what they think we might be seeing with other young people, and what they've noticed in different institutions. These include their own experiences with police and in schools. After three months of these meetings and getting to know each other, we started thinking about what our research questions and our interview script would be. We went through the ethics process by outlining the process to everyone, every step of the way. Sometimes they wanted to know what's going on. Sometimes they're not very interested in talking about the university ethics board.

We have kept the team tight with one another. Sometimes the co-researchers had to take a month off because they were precariously housed too, that things are going on in their life and that they need to sort out their affairs. Or, they want to take a break from the research because it's quite intense. We just keep the door open. So, if you're part of the research team, you can always be part of the research team. That has been our intentional policy that the research is participative in whatever way that makes sense for them. Before we started the interviews, the youth researchers have been recruiting interviewees. They are really good at recruiting. They know what's up and who might not be accessing services. Even if other homeless youths are not coming to the shelter, we can still get their perspectives and maybe why they are not accessing even *Dans la rue's* services.

Penelope: How many interviews have you conducted and how is your research project going now?

Jayne: We have conducted about 30 interviews so far. Many of those are multiple interviews with the same person. We are trying to get to the institutional histories of young people. We will ask people to start with their memories of an institution, say, their first memories of schools, and trace all the way to where they are in relation to this institution today. One thing we found while we were practicing interviews with young people is that one hour is often not enough time to go through a whole lifetime of institutional barriers. So, I or my supervisor, along with one of the youths will interview a person. The same team will

interview them up to three times so we can meet and dig into one trajectory through an institution. Then we can take a break or jump into the next interview. These young people are used to quickly rehashing their whole life stories about their experiences in accessing services. There's evidence that systems seem to think that they are working, but that youth are getting lost. In looking at the institutional history of young people, we can see possible interventions before they became homeless. The youth know what those are. They will say, "I've tried to access mental health in school and I couldn't." Or, "I just needed money for one month's rent, and I couldn't find that. That's how I ended up homeless for an extended period." But, often, they see it as them not knowing how it would have worked for them because they're 'bad'. It's clear from an institutional ethnography approach (which we employ) that these are institutional and systemic barriers that also are affecting some youth more than others. When we're with queer youth, youth of colour, youth with severe mental health issues, and youth who have intersections of these positionalities, our initial findings show that they have a lot more barriers to deal with.

Penelope: In this participatory action research, I'm curious about its action component? Has it been a linear process?

Jayne: It's not linear at all. One of the action pieces in my research I think is just working with the team and constantly re-evaluating what we're doing as a team. If something isn't working with the team, we stop and we do what we can to act in that moment. In terms of what we want to be doing as action, it is also being informed and shaped by each interview. Every part of it, as we're learning, we are realizing our findings are also things that many members of the team already knew. So, we are not waiting until we have a certain number of interviews when we can say, "We know this, we know what's going on." The youth know what is going on and the barriers they're facing. Any chance we have to mobilize in whatever way we can, we will be taking the opportunity. In a few days, the research team is going to give a talk to a bunch of teachers, nurses and, police officers about what and how they could be better supporting young homeless people. Part of what we also want to do is open that space more for young people, to be speaking in a more supportive environment. This action component is informed a lot by anarchist thought, and anarchist action, which encourages embodied activism.

Penelope: Are you saying, anarchist thoughts are actually what informs your scholarship and engagement? Like on the fly, are you conscious right away, that this is the anarchist me and this is how I'm responding to it?

Jayne: What I have been explicitly thinking about is how anarchist theory (and anarchist actions, which go hand in hand) is not an abstracted theory detached from our everyday life. My research has been playing with an anarchist theoretical and methodological approach to Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography (I.E), which I don't know if she would be

super cool with — maybe, hopefully. Anarchist theory and I.E. and PAR's conceptions of actions tie well together. One of the things about I.E. is that you are not trying to study people. You are trying to have research that serves the communities you are part of and working with. Through tracing out systems of power and demonstrating how we could be turning power into everyday activism to change the world in which we live in very immediate and tangible ways; to better understand the structures of power so that we can disrupt them and take them down.

It has been tricky. The whole project is about state institutions and policy, and we are also thinking of influencing policy. On the other hand, we're coming from this anarchist, grassroots perspective that is saying, well, "The state is continually failing, these hierarchies of power are damaging and causing violence to young people." So, we want to work explicitly against that. One thing that informs our work, from an anarchist perspective, is that we are trying to live the way that we would like to live. We try to proactively act today and not down the road and influence how we would like everyone to be acting. Also, most of our youth in the team is pretty anarchist already, which was not intentional when we were hiring them. We have a very non-hierarchical team. It's not as if my supervisor and I come down from the university and tell everyone what is going to happen. In fact, we try to explicitly make it the opposite. It is youth-led, and we are disrupting even the team's power dynamics. We try to make sure that there is consensus-based decision making every step of the way. We are also cognizant of damaging hierarchies that we are working within. Working with the youth researchers fosters part of what makes this project so great. We have this radical imagination of how things could be different. We do not see it as utopian. We see it as necessary. Things must change because youth are dying and suffering. So, part of that anarchist piece is recognizing the need for fixing systems while they exist, but that the systems themselves need to change.

Penelope: When you say, 'radical imagination', what do you mean by it?

Jayne: What I found is that each young person who we work with on our team and each young person whom we are interviewing, they already have radical imagination and they already have these ideas of what could have helped them and other young people. One thing I've realized while working with them is that we have more solutions than ever. Some of them are feasible. Others are wild things. For instance, one of the young people we were working with has a tiny house that she built. Her idea is that she would like to travel around and build tiny houses for all the homeless and outfit them with electricity and everything. This would be a way that each person could have their own space. There's also a lot of talking about taking down billionaires, "eat the rich" comments and calling for revolution. The youth are also thinking of wealth redistribution.

They are imaginative in their possible alternatives. When you are in that precarious

situation, you spend a lot of time thinking about your ideal life. For some of them, being homeless at some time is also like a form of freedom. When we are thinking of solutions, it is also not always stability or access to institutions. Sometimes it is getting rid of the institutions altogether and finding a way to survive in your community. There are things we are imagining today and, in the future, but there are also things that the young people are already doing each day.

Penelope: Any parting words before we conclude?

Jayne: I just want to emphasize that we do need people undertaking engaged, community-driven, and ethical research. Especially for young researchers like myself, who are working on social issues that directly impact us, it can be tricky to find a balance between entering academia and opening up spaces for ourselves and our peers, finding support and allies to ensure we can continue to do that work. For me, research is only one prong of many to address issues like homelessness, poverty, housing precarity—but it is an important one. I would hope that other young scholars can find the supports they need to do the research in these, often, unwelcoming academic spaces, and this research, in turn, can be used to build community and networks of resistance!

About the Contributors

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