

***Sisters of Pain* and the child protection paradox**

An ethnographic study of a young woman living in secure care

Leon Fulcher

International Child and Youth Care Network Board, New Zealand.

Aliese Moran

Independent Publicist, USA.

James P. Anglin

School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, BC, Canada.

Correspondence should be addressed to: Leon C. Fulcher, MSW, PhD, Child and Youth Care Consultant and Learning Zone Coordinator; Chair of the International Child and Youth Care Network Board of Governors, Tuai Cottage, 44 Mountain Rd, RD 5, Tuai, Wairoa 4195, New Zealand, E-mail: Leon@cyc-net.org.

Abstract

This paper is extracted from a recent book entitled *Sisters of Pain: An Ethnography of Young Women Living in Secure Care* by Leon Fulcher and Aliese Moran (2013) which presents an ethnographic study of young women living in a high security youth services facility in the USA. In addition to the actual voices of many of the sixteen residents involved in that study, the text includes analyses and reflections by their primary social worker, retrospective reflections on each girl's experiences by one of the former residents, along with references to contemporary child and youth care research and practice literature. Although these life story accounts occurred over four decades ago, the voices are remarkably alive and worthy of note, especially given the emergence of notions about trauma-informed practice and pain-based behaviour. Too often the experiences of pain and the voices of children in care are overlooked or sanitized in scientific studies. For that reason, ethnographic research can help to inform our understandings about youth care as scholars and professionals. Nicki's story, one of the sixteen presented here, explores some key elements of an enduring child protection paradox, namely the apparent inevitability of 'doing harm whilst doing good'. Questions are posed for consideration by human services practitioners, managers, policy makers, re-

searchers and students. While this story is real, the names of residents and geographical locations have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Keywords: children's voices, secure care, pain-based behaviour, ethnographic study

Introduction

A recent publication entitled *Sisters of Pain: An Ethnography of Young Women Living in Secure Care* (Fulcher & Moran, 2013) offers a remarkable journey into the lives and experiences of sixteen young women who lived (for brief periods) in a high security care facility in the USA during the 1970s. These girls had been assigned by Juvenile Courts to an Assessment Center which, after assessment, transferred them to the secure unit – one option available at an institutional campus for older teenagers, after failed group home and foster care placements. The campus for older teenage girls where the first author was employed supported two secure units (populations separated on the basis of maturity), seven open campus cottages, a high school, administration and professional support, as well as full recreational facilities.

Wherever possible, the girls' stories are presented in their own voices, supplemented by the voices of care workers, social workers, and family members. The reader is introduced to sixteen young women, three of whom were Native American, three were Afro-American, one was Hispanic and the rest Caucasian. At the end of each chapter, short commentaries are used to link each young woman's life story with contemporary 'best practice' responses with young people sharing similar circumstances, with questions posed for further discussion.

The voices and experiences of young people in care are too often sanitised, silenced and ignored although they deserve to be widely heard within the child welfare, youth justice, mental health and education systems around the world. This is why these *Sisters* are being introduced to a wider scientific audience through this special issue. In general, such personal accounts have been written by young people themselves (e.g., Daniels & Livingston, 2014; Hewitt, 2003; Lau, 1989; Raychaba, 1988, 1993; Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996) or have been gathered through interviews and informal discussions (e.g., Kahan, 1979; Little & Kelly, 1995; Owen, 1996).

Method

Sisters of Pain brings together in one volume residents' stories, actual case notes of professionals, and retrospective reflections by one of the residents involved, with each life story cross-referenced and supported by relevant professional literature. The human ethics associated with fashioning this ethnography received careful scrutiny since standard ethical protocols requiring informed consent and release of information within a formally recognised research project could not be followed in the decades since these case notes and materials were written. Care has been taken not to include anything that would reveal the young wom-

en's or workers' identities, except for Aliese who speaks as a representative voice for *Sisters* whose voices have been silenced.

Supervisors at the time knew of the personal professional record-keeping of the first author, and notes were shared with them as these on-going narratives were useful to the work as a therapeutic care team. The notes were never part of the formal case recording system. Supervisors agreed to the keeping of this record and accepted that journaling did not jeopardize the confidentiality of the clients nor risk exposure of their identities. They also knew of the aspirations of the first author to one day share the stories of young women who experienced residential group care services 'at the end of the line'. Four decades later, we know of only one of those supervisors and managers who is still living, far away from the events written about here.

The institutional services which featured in the lives of the *Sisters of Pain* no longer exist. The child welfare legislation and systems have all changed from juvenile rehabilitation into child protection and youth justice services. All who feature in the *Sisters of Pain* have been assigned pseudonyms and geographic locations have been altered. As participant observers in this ethnography, both lead authors share advocacy for ethical standards which honour the memory of the *Sisters of Pain*.

This article includes excerpts from *Sisters of Pain*, drawn from the preface, Nicki's Story (one of the sixteen young residents), letters and memos (written by a Child Welfare Director and Nicki's social worker, Leon Fulcher), a reflection on Nicki's Story offered some forty years later by Nicki's friend and the book's co-author Aliese Moran, and a closing reflection by the first author. Nicki's Story is presented here because

it illuminates a central paradox in child protection work: the problematic interface between human service bureaucracies and the lives of children and families. Following excerpts from the book's Preface, Nicki's Story is shared in her own words, with professional notes and memos from the time, Aliese's reflections about living with and around Nicki, along with relevant scholarly and professional literature highlighted.

Reflections in Advance (Extract from the Preface by James Anglin)

The reader of the book needs to be prepared for a psycho-emotional journey into self which will confront your beliefs, values and perceptions in personally and professionally challenging ways. The real authors of the text are the young women – many just girls – who give voice to their pain, often in a raw and disturbing fashion. This is not a book for anyone who is unwilling to accompany these girls, their family members and their workers into the 'heart of darkness'. But it is also a book about hope, compassion and spiritual resilience. [...]

Young people in child welfare and juvenile corrections services almost always experience deep and profound pain. Commonly, this involves psycho-emotional pain which can become invisible to those around them. What family members, friends and child welfare workers observe is 'acting out', 'delinquent', 'maladjusted' or 'bad' behaviour. We can become insensitive to what lies behind and underneath the surface. As a result of seeing too many workers 'glossing over' the pain of the children and youths with whom they were working,

and reading too many books on ‘troubled and troubling children’ that left their pain hidden and largely unaddressed, the term ‘pain-based behaviour’ was coined in an attempt to unveil this basic reality about the lives of young people in care (Anglin, 2002).

Young people in our ‘care systems’ throughout the world have suffered unspeakable (or at least unspoken) traumas, losses, violence and neglectfulness which interfere (sometimes in what seem to us as bizarre ways) with their growth into personhood and even the formation of healthy pathways in their brains. The central challenge of care work is to respond sensitively and effectively to pain and pain-based behaviour – which to be worthy of the name caring involves connecting through direct, emotionally responsive and reciprocally meaningful relationships. To do this reasonably well, carers and other professionals need to be sufficiently healthy, self-aware and communicative with others (e.g. supervisors and co-workers), as relational care involves moving through potentially dangerous territory. These hurting young people are survivors, usually very clever, sometimes seductive, often experienced and generally desperate enough to ensnare the naïve or unsuspecting ‘do-gooder’ in their sticky webs. [...]

It is a paradox of residential care that in an artificial and non-normative setting, young people can often develop a sense of belonging, perhaps for the first time. Being free, at least to some degree, of daily fear, abuse and demeaning reactions young people can experience a sense of being respected, a sense of being cared about and cared for, a sense of self-worth, a sense of competence, and a sense of their own potential (amongst many other things) in a new way of living. [...]

Nicki's Story

Some years before her transition out of care, Nicki had spent a short period of time in the secure unit which accommodated the other young women featured in the book. Nicki was one of the few residents who ever escaped.

The official letter below – although composed after Nicki's personal letter which follows – provides some historical context for her placement.

4 December – Official Letter from the Acting Director of Institutions

Dear [Social Worker]

In order to keep things official, I thought I should write a summary of the meeting held about Nicki where the decision was made to try her in the Exit Cottage. The meeting was held on 8 November and included representatives from all State institutions that work with girls. All agreed that none of the institutions could accomplish more for Nicki. However, she had to be somewhere while placement plans were made, and there was some feeling that she should leave the State Department of Institutions on a successful note if at all possible.

We felt we could not work with Nicki any more at the Assessment Center for several reasons. It isn't possible to offer therapeutic programming for Nicki while doing assessment work with all the rest of the resident group of girls. This is especially so in view of Nicki's ability to control the peer group. We are further on in the process of changing from a six-week to a four-week assess-

ment stay and could not devote energy to special therapeutic programming. Finally, all staff are exhausted from several months of working with Nicki and we are not productive in our work with her.

We discussed all options available and decided that Exit Cottage would most nearly meet her needs, placing responsibility on her and allowing for a rapid parole. We were aware that the Exit program might not be successful and therefore also recommended that she be discharged at age 18.

Sincerely,

The Superintendent
Service Delivery Division

16 November – Letter from Nicki to Exit Cottage Social Worker (whom she had met previously)

I remember my father disappeared. And we still lived in his house. Then I saw my mother standing in my father's kitchen with Him. I didn't understand what was going on, just that He was in our house and He was kissing my mother.

He was just so brutal and mean and I never understood anything. He'd whip us till we either cried or fell. After awhile, I'd refused to cry, no matter what, and I'd just tell myself – it don't matter no more. It can't hurt me no more because everything is hopeless. I just deadened myself to all he did. Then I'd never give him the satisfaction of seeing me hurt or cry. When he'd yell and threaten me, I learned after awhile to just stare at the ground so he couldn't see my eyes – my anger and hate and my fright. And when he came

in after me to beat me, I just stood there and closed my eyes and didn't move. I got determined to show no feelings so he wouldn't know how it hurt me.

Instead, I would go to my room afterwards and turn my radio on and just hate him more and more. I wanted to kill him, and I'd just shake all over but I never could cry. I can't cry over things – personal things that really hurt me. I can cry when I get super pissed. I guess I can't cry because I still feel he's waiting to hear me cry – just waiting for me to break down. And I can't let him get any satisfaction out of my pain.

I used to pick dandelions for my mother and I'd run in the house and give them to her. But she always got mad and threw them away saying they were dirty weeds. I used to try to help her with the housework but she told him I was always under her feet and I got beat.

I used to ask her to hold me and I'd cry but she was so cold, she'd just say, 'Will you just leave me alone, I'm busy'. Always too busy – too busy – except when it came to him.

My school teachers despised me. I had a smart mouth, and mocked or sassed them a lot. They slapped me and spanked me, and dragged me from rooms by my hair or ear. They also made me stand in front of the class while they ridiculed me in front of the other kids.

Every day it was the same shit. It just got worse and worse. I got suspended in Fifth Grade, expelled in Sixth Grade. And I got kicked out of my Kindergarten class too. Oh yeah – I never made it thru Brownies either! My third or fourth meeting I was kicked out. Same with 4H. The best things I could do while growing up was beating up the boys, playing baseball, football and

basketball. Also dirt-clod fights. And of course I could mouth off quite well.

Academically in school – I was the best student in all my classes – but I always flunked because of my behavior. I know I could have been a straight ‘A’ student and a good, innocent young girl – and everybody’s dart board. I chose to become a monster before I’d ever be any one’s doormat.

So I flunked out. I got kicked out of everything. I beat up the boys. I played sports and I read a hell of a lot. Everyone else was reading ‘Danny the Dinosaur’ or the Dr Seuss books. I was reading Steinbeck and Laura Ingles Wilder. The teachers just hated that – and so did the kids. But I kept my nose in my books – dreamed up lots of fantasies from different ones. I was also very lonely and scared. (I wrote the above last night. Right now I’m on my second joint and I’m gonna write some terrible shit that embarrasses me to write, okay?)

My stepbrother was about 3 or 4 years older than me. And as young as I can remember – I remember him always trying to mess with me. First he’d exhibit himself to me and later on he was sticking his hands down my pants. When I was 11 or 12 and he was 16 or 17, he tried to force me to fuck with him.

For as long as I can remember, I was always so frightened of him and felt so guilty cause I knew it wasn’t right. I had let him. I had only cried and didn’t stick up for myself. And I felt so dirty and ashamed.

I never could tell my mother anything. I was too afraid I’d get beat. Like I never even thought of telling my mother about how the school teachers treated me cause then she’d know they had a ‘reason’ so I’d get beat again.

Well, I guess I just began feeling beaten in every way, by everyone and always on the verge of throwing my life in. But hate of Him inside of me – that man who beat me – kept me going. His voice remained in my ears, mocking me.

And all the other ‘Hims’ in the world tried to trick me and hurt me. And I was going crazy because I couldn’t trust anyone. God, how I wanted somebody, so fucking badly. It drove my mind crazy and blanketed my heart with a heavy dark cloud. Humiliation, ridiculed and I’m always feeling worthless and no good.

After taking 38 of my Mother’s thyroid pills, I woke up two days later, alive and disappointed. I hated myself more because I couldn’t even kill myself. Empty all the time inside.

I filled my mind with books, my heart with emptiness and my soul with the rage and bitterness I felt towards everyone – but especially Him.

My stepfather hated cats. One time he was mowing the lawn on his sit-down mower. The neighbor’s kitten – Buttercup was her name – was in our yard so he yelled at me to get the cat out of his yard. So I was chasing the cat and the cat got in front of the mower. My stepfather pushed the accelerator and all I remember is running and running and hearing that terrible clunk, clunk as the cat went through the blades.

I couldn’t stop the tears.

And hearing Him laughing about running over the cat at supper! That night he bragged about what he’d done and while everyone kind of laughed, I vomited and then got beat for it and sent to my room where I curled up in my favorite spot – by the heater with a blanket and my radio or maybe a book.

Right before I left home, I remember my Mother always telling me, 'You were so cute when you were a baby – always smiling and never causing trouble. Now look at you! You're mean and you're always causing us trouble. You're just no good!!' I just made my face go motionless, clinched my fists and walked to my room. It was always in my room, after the door was closed and I was alone that I'd just collapse. And I let my vulnerability and fright float around the room. I had to release the pain and pressure of storing away all those feelings so I'd run to my room and just let it all go.

Then I'd collect myself – stuff all of me in a box – and go out to face them. I was just a body. That's all. Oh fuck, I feel so bad about all these things that are coming into my mind right now.

Well, I ain't going to write no more. I just wanted to write this to you so you could bring them up when we talk about my family. It will help me to talk to you easier if I can write it to you first.

Nicki

9 December – Initial Program Plan Written by Social Worker

Nicki has been in the State System for at least four years and has spent time at all institutional programs and group homes for girls administered by the State. In talking with Nicki, it now appears that primary emotional issues relating to her commitment in the beginning had to do with a long history of physical and sexual abuse in her family. She is not keen to talk about this and it is a very painful area for her, even though it's important that she and staff un-

derstand these facts about her past so we can better understand how she has reacted to the institutional system for the past four years she has been in it.

It is appalling to this social worker to reflect on Nicki's claim that during the four years she has been in 'The System', very little attention or consistent effort has been directed towards helping Nicki resolve some of the issues from her family life. The pent up hostility, the intense frustration and the deep emotional scars from this period have left Nicki fighting a System which often times she did not understand. The System became a symbol of all that her stepfather and family meant to her. At present, Nicki has very limited resources in the community to which she can turn. This, in itself, is frustrating and once again she lashes out at people around her because they haven't helped her sufficiently to get plugged back into the community.

It goes without saying that Nicki is a very intelligent girl but she is not at all pleased to have this thrown at her when she is not handling herself responsibly. People have responded to Nicki's intelligence and I think that is fine. However, there are often times when she feels on the verge of being crazy when she can't make sense of feelings or use her intelligence to work out the intense feelings she has and carries with her most of the time. Nicki's institutionalized boyfriend seems to be a positive source of support for Nicki at this time. She hopes eventually to live with him in the future.

The principal long-term goal is to get Nicki out of the youth justice system and legally emancipated by the Court. At the same time, we need to help Nicki get her Graduate Equivalency Diploma, work out a place to live and work or school when she returns to her local community. [...]

Christmas Break – Letter to Social Worker Received on Return from Holiday

Hi

I don't know why I'm writing or exactly what I'm going to write. I guess I've just been feeling bottomless and empty. And I feel like I've lost all the goals I was striving for. It always seems I lose before I gain, in every situation that comes up.

It's always so lonely around here in the night times. I hate loneliness. Yet I hate aloneness much worse. And I feel a tremendous amount of aloneness. So alienated.

We had a few difficulties while you were gone. A pretty major disaster as defined by everyone. Yet I don't feel it is as big as they are blowing it up to be.

Well, at this present time, I find myself very confused. So before I rattle on into eternity, I'll put down this pen. See you in my 'Contract Review Board'.

Nicki

28 December – Note from Nicki to Social Worker

It may sound stupid, perhaps even childish. Sorry to say it but I need a family – somewhere to belong. I cannot take anymore of this aloneness. I would like a Mother and a Father, but knowing this to be an impossibility that I cannot handle anymore, I have decided that my life is no longer worthwhile.

Of course there are many other things that interfere with my life. But I do not feel like going through it. I don't have an-

anything left to fight for. That's why I am leaving the way I am.

Imagine, this place has my mind and soul. And now they'll have my body too! Ironical enough.

Not much more to say.

Nicki

27 December – Institutional Incident Report Recorded at 2:55 p.m.

A fire started in Nicki's room after she left a candle burning. It set fire to her books and the shelf. Smouldering books were removed. Exit Cottage residents were told there would be no burning of candles in their rooms.

27 December – Institutional Incident Report Recorded at 10:30 p.m.

Nicki cut on her arm with a razor blade. We talked with Nicki and after a short while, she accepted the suggestion of cleaning up and having her arm taken care of. Shift Supervisor was called and the nurse was called back to campus to go with Nicki to the hospital and have her arm attended to.

28 December – Institutional Incident Report Recorded at 8:30 p.m.

Nicki threatening to commit suicide by jumping off the institution water tower at approximately 8:30 p.m. Nicki handed in a suicide note to staff on duty and then left the Exit Cottage at about 8:30 p.m. Mr J read the note and immediately contacted Security at the Post Phone. Mr J had ear-

lier tried to delay Nicki's departure but was unsuccessful. Security followed Nicki and observed her climbing the water tower and insisting she would jump. Mr K eventually succeeded in talking Nicki into climbing back down the tower and returning to Exit Cottage. Nicki later reported that she was feeling dejected and alone due to being alienated from her family and to a series of recent incidents with separation problems. Nicki was left in the Exit Cottage for the night, with regular half hour checks made by night staff after Nicki retired to her room. This was done in the interests of her safety. She appeared in reasonably good emotional condition after returning to the Cottage. Nicki is to meet with her social worker the following day to discuss what type of help she needs.

3 January – Youth Mental Health Service Admission Note Presenting Problem

Nicki has been asking for several weeks to talk to a psychiatrist and in the last week has made three suicidal gestures: (1) cutting her arms; (2) overdosing on Valium; and (3) climbing the water tower and threatening to jump. Nicki says quite frankly that those were only gestures and that she does not really want to die. [...]

Mental Status: Nicki is a well-developed, well-nourished seventeen and one-half year old Caucasian girl who came to the interview dressed in a boyish manner with workman boots, jeans and a boy's crew neck white sweater with black and red stripes down the arms. She wears no make-up but her hair is long and free flowing. She displays little overt anxiety but tends to be quite constricted and tense. Her mood is depressed.

Her affect is a cool facade of bravado and/or 'knowing all the answers'. She speaks in the language of today's youth. Her speech is totally coherent and relevant. Her main pre-occupations center around her feeling the need for 'a family – whoever wants me', her dislike for institutions and authority figures and, on the other hand, her fear of her approaching eighteenth birthday. She feels totally inadequate at the prospect of being on her own. She blames all of her problems on others. Nicki is oriented in all areas. Her memory is intact. Intellectually she is within the average range. Her insight and judgment are poor. She is easily frustrated and has poor impulse control.

Tentative Diagnosis: Unsocialised Aggressive Reaction of Adolescence manifested by impulsivity, drug abuse, problems with authority figures, blaming others for all her problems, etc.

Recommendation: Nicki is formally admitted to State Mental Health Services.

Afterword to Nicki's Story

During the more than four years she spent in State Child Welfare and Youth Justice services, Nicki ended up spending time at every placement available for girls in that State System. Nicki herself had sought help from local child welfare services as the twelfth of her Mother's thirteen children. Help was sought after a long history of physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by her stepfather and stepbrother. Wherever Nicki went around the System, professionals working with her tried everything, and failed. The System also failed Nicki. Her first placement at the secure unit and a subsequent high profile

escape resulted in Nicki being labelled a hard core delinquent.

As a very bright young woman, Nicki used intellectual games with everyone assigned to help her. She succeeded in getting one State employee to give up her employment and become Nicki's foster parent. Then Nicki stole this foster parent's car. The Directors of all State institutions for children and young people met to consider what could be done with Nicki, concluding that the goal was to emancipate Nicki legally from the State Child Welfare and Youth Justice system, thereby placing responsibilities for decision-making squarely on Nicki's shoulders.

The closer this emancipation plan became a reality, the more Nicki's coping skills were tested and crumbled. All the emotional turmoil that had not been addressed by professionals in the Child Welfare and Youth Justice systems for more than four years now overwhelmed her. Instead of legal emancipation from the Youth Justice System, Nicki was transferred to adolescent mental health services. Nicki thus continued her 'career' in the 'State Care System', as a registered mental health patient instead of being a young person in out-of-home care. We believe that after a lengthy period in prison, Nicki died.

Reflections on Nicki's Story (Aliese Moran)

This story ends tragically and Nicki was one of my closest friends. She was tough, like me, and she was smart, like me. I trusted her. She said what she meant and meant what she said.

School – yeah, they always hated us. It was just another system where we never

fit. I remember once in 7th grade when I was expelled after being in the school one day – I did not even do anything. But, the school was afraid of me being a bad influence on their ideal little citizens. We were the smart ones, who got bored with all of them and their curriculum. They tried to teach us so much useless information, and nothing that we could truly relate to, in our real world. We were a generation that questioned everything, and for good cause as it turned out.

We were intelligent and had the ability to learn. We simply got bored with their itinerary and became class clowns, the voices for others, or chose not to attend. Besides, what real chance did you have when every report card followed you from school to school? We challenged their ability to teach the slanted lies of history, and grammar rules that still befuddle me to this day. Back in those days, the teachers did hit you, did ridicule you, and God forbid IF anything bad ever happened on the campus, you were automatically blamed and no questions asked. It was so difficult. We did not fit in anywhere. Not at home, not at school, and certainly most of us did not deserve to be locked up and mistreated so badly.

They were trying to get us to conform to their images of what little girls should be like. It was the most bizarre concept ever. I mean how do you take someone who has been beaten daily and raped like a savage dog and now try to teach them English grammar? Like any of that really mattered in our world. What a joke!

We were not the problem, but rather, the by-product of the problem. That is one of the most important things I feel they didn't know about or understand as our carers or jailers. We were lucky when

an honest and knowledgeable person came in contact with us. In this case, it was our social worker. As noted on December 9th of the social worker notes, 'it is appalling'... Point made. The system saw us as the problem and the causes of the problems, rather than looking at the real issues. But then again, we were here, locked up, to work on our issues and NOT that of the system. It was so hard for us to distinguish the difference between the two. Meaning to say, our problems and/or the system? Most of our problems were the aftermath of failed systems, failed marriages, sexual and physical abuse perpetrated on us by others, in a society that was rapidly changing perspectives on everything.

Over the years, many of our caregivers looked at us with disgust, or worse, the ones we overheard in animated discussions about our physical rape and abuse. It freaked us out and creeped us out! Those kinds of ugly things made it very difficult to reach out to these caregivers with any true depth or honesty. So by the time you got to this high security unit, you had pretty much seen it all and it WAS the end of the line. So much damage had been done to us over the years and this is what had happened to Nicki.

Nicki's wisdom shines through in her letter to her social worker around Christmas break. I love where she says 'It always seems I lose before I gain ...'. That is so profound and it is the way life works, or that has been my experience. There is always a set-back of sorts before some breakthrough. And also, that Nicki recognized the difference between loneliness and being alone. Many educated adults to this day have a hard time coping or understanding that there is a difference between loneliness and being alone.

Nicki was my friend and my confidante although we did not get to spend much time together. Loneliness is such a hard emotion to have. I don't think we are really equipped to handle that at a young age, even through the course of natural development in a healthy and thriving environment. That is why we had the family unit, like the wolf pack – in part, being a part of a family unit. The balanced inter-relationships are central to the fundamentals ... like Stevie Wonder sang in *The Keys of Life* ... there must be a sense of belonging and duty that comes naturally.

One huge part of Nicki's life is when she was in a state mental hospital and they used 'electroshock treatment' on her. This went on for months. It was something right out of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I don't think she ever really recovered from those sessions. The effects of so many years of abuse had simply taken over and it makes me mad and sad to have lost a good friend just because she was born into a dysfunctional family.

How do you ever truly recover from that sort of abuse? I later learned that she got hooked up with some girl on a joyride. The other girl had stolen a car and drove to somewhere in the Midwest – some very backwoods thinking in that day. The girl had a hand gun and she robbed some local-yokel gas station. I don't have all the details. I do know that she was incarcerated for many years, raped in jail by one of the guards and had the baby while in jail. At some point in time, one of her old probation officers had her transferred to another state, closer to home. The child was put up for adoption. Nicki later died but I don't have the details. I cry tears for my sister now and feel that I somehow let her down.

Reflections on Doing Harm Whilst Doing Good

(Leon Fulcher)

We are indebted to the Australian scholars Ainsworth and Hansen (2012) for articulating *The Child Protection Paradox* that confronts each social worker or youth care worker engaging with children or young people placed in out-of-home care. We think the same principles apply when working with young people who started off as 'at-risk' child protection kids, but their pain-based behaviour drew them increasingly into youth justice networks.

In some places, as in Scotland, child protection and youth justice services are more integrated and mediated through the Children's Hearings system until such time as a referral is made to the adult courts. In New Zealand, the distinction between child protection and youth justice is more clearly defined. We think the following principles apply for all children and young people in out-of-home care. Children's rights and parents' rights are both central to this paradox.

'Child protection authorities appear to be reluctant to acknowledge that removing a child from parental care causes trauma for the child and the parents. While it may be in the long-term interests of the child to be removed, the fact is that at the point of removal the child is traumatized and this should not be ignored. Equally, parental distress and grief is profound (Burgheim, 2005; Davies, 2011; Schofield et al., 2010) and neither should this be ignored. ... Such denial of parental distress and grief may of course allow child protection caseworkers to rationalize their action(s) in terms of 'doing good'. Moreover, focusing on the good and ignoring the harm may be one way caseworkers manage the stress of child

protection work and in turn justify their actions which are sometimes wrong. ... But this hardly seems humane' (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2012, p. 149).

Regardless of any potential harm, it is important to acknowledge that child protection workers do help by removing children from seriously abusive parents. Everyone agrees with this. However, little attention is given to the increasing number of children who are removed from parental care and lose contact with extended family members. Moreover, many of these children are not restored to parental care, regardless of child protection policy claims to the contrary.

In her review of child protection services in England and Wales, Munro (2011) called for a return to *relationship-based* supportive practices that encourage and reward parental efforts to alter their lifestyles and parenting practices whilst attending to fundamental child protection concerns. Scott, Arney and Vimparni (2010) argue for a more humane practice where empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism are the cornerstones of practice.

Nicki was a young woman who came into the Child Welfare system under child protection legislation. She had experienced physical and emotional abuse and neglect for a long time before the system really did anything. As Nicki got more and more angry about what was happening in her life, she got into more fights and started running away. At this stage, the system gave her the label of 'incorrigible' youth in need of supervision, not simply a child in need of care and protection because of historic abuse. The more caseworkers in the system responded to Nicki's 'incorrigible' behaviour – the outer kid – the more Nicki bounced around the system. At the age of

17, Nicki held the record for having been placed in every State programme available. She left a couple of these placements in disarray before moving on.

As Nicki approached the age of 18 years – adult status – all State Child Welfare managers gathered together to plan Nicki's systematic transition to 'independent status' and leave the Child Welfare System. After nearly three years fighting her way around the Child Welfare and Youth Justice systems, Nicki transitioned to the Mental Health System. Earlier in her Child Welfare placements, Nicki was rejected by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service because she presented as a 'character disordered' youth instead of someone with mental illness. As she approached age 18, Nicki presented with mental illness symptoms, heightened no doubt through having had these 'symptoms' ignored throughout three years of child welfare placements.

Aliese drew comparisons between Nicki's tragic experiences in the mental health system with those highlighted in Kelsey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Nicki became and remained a victim of the State child welfare system. Nicki told us about her pain-based behaviour. Doing harm? Nicki had plenty of reasons to be angry that the system had done her wrong. When the anger and nightmares left her exhausted, Nicki entered a black emotional abyss that enticed her towards suicide. She was bright enough to out-fox group life counselors and social workers. Nicki learned from every child welfare placement, even how to distribute cannabis or sexual services from group homes. Were the State-employed caseworkers doing good whilst doing harm? Or were they doing harm whilst doing good? The paradox remains. When working with young people like Nicki and her *Sisters*

of Pain, inexperienced social workers and youth workers must grapple with the *Doing Harm Whilst Doing Good Paradox*. That paradox underpins relational best practices with all children and young people in out-of-home care.

Ainsworth and Hansen (2012) argue that the forensic model of child protection practice has failed because it focuses solely on the child, not the child in the context of his or her family. A child cannot be removed from his or her family and be immediately offered a brighter future by the State. The research on successful foster care placements is not altogether encouraging, especially in the USA, in the world's biggest economy where there are more gun-related killings per capita population than in any other OECD country. Nicki's life ended with drama, underscoring how doing harm whilst doing good resonates throughout the life stories of young people in care. Though rarely discussed in the social work or child and youth care literature, *The Child Protection Paradox* remains a contemporary challenge for all employed in the child welfare and youth justice fields.

Conclusion

The intent of ethnographic research is to bring the voices, daily life experiences and life story accounts of particular people into clearer focus through a rigorous and systematic examination of narratives that offer insights into 'contested realities'. Nicki's tragic story is but one of many – each unique – with storylines of recurring pain that are all too common. The struggle to create ethical, principle-based and effective systems of child protection, child

and adolescent mental health, and youth justice services for young people like Nicki continues to challenge governments worldwide (e.g., Cameron, Fine, Maiter, Frensch, & Freymond, 2013; Holzscheiter, 2010; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2000).

It is important that we find ways to include, to explore together, and to build upon the lived experiences of young people in our child and youth services, including them in research, policy-development and participant-oriented approaches to service delivery. Advocates such as John Seita (Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996) and Jenny Malloy (Daniels & Livingston, 2014) – former youths in care – along with youth in care networks such as *Youth in Care Canada* (<http://www.youthincare.ca/>), and *Who Cares? Scotland* (<http://www.whocarescotland.org/professionals/publications-briefings-research/>) actively promote the inclusion of young people with experience of life in care on Boards of Directors, in Programme Reviews and in participative research endeavours examining child welfare and youth justice services (see for an example Ten Brummelaar et al., 2014).

Many questions are posed through an examination of Nicki's experiences in the child and youth care system. The overarching question involves how the 'doing harm whilst doing good paradox' operates in child

protection work, and what might be done to better manage it on a personal and professional basis. What examples might child and family welfare professionals glean from their own practice experiences where the 'doing harm whilst doing good paradox' has operated?

In light of recent research on resilience, it is important to ask what competencies and resilience skills were evident in the fragments of Nicki's life story? Even in situations such as Nicki's, where the ending is not a happy one, it is important to remember that young people in care often exhibit exceptional capacities for survival over many years. For those who put faith in 'personal care plans', it is sobering to see how – as in Nicki's case – such an administrative process can in effect 'kick young people out of the system'. What potential harm is being inflicted on young people when we simply accept that children 'age out' of the system, ceasing to be our concern or responsibility?

Ethnographic study about the lived experiences of young people in care engaging with their carers and others can contribute significantly to inform policy and strategic planning, research and educational efforts and outcomes that matter – but only if opportunities are created for these voices to be heard. The most important thing is whether anyone bothers to listen.

References

- Ainsworth, F., & Hansen, P. (2012). Doing harm while doing good: The child protection paradox. *Child and Youth Services*, 33, 146-157.
- Anglin, J. P. (2002). *Pain, normality and the struggle for congruence: Reinterpreting residential care for children and youth*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press.
- Burgheim, T. (2005). The grief of families whose children have been removed: Implications for workers in out-of-home care. *Developing Practice*, 13, 57-61.

- Cameron, G., Fine, M., Maiter, S., Frensch, K., & Freymond, N. (2013). *Creating positive systems of child and family welfare: Congruence with the everyday lives of children and parents*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Daniels, H., & Livingston, M. (2014). *Hackney child*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Davies, P. (2011). The impact of a child protection investigation: A personal reflective account. *Child and Family Social Work*, 15, 201-209.
- Fulcher, L. C., & Moran, A. (2013). *Sisters of pain: An ethnography of young women living in secure care*. Cape Town: CYC-Net Press [the book can be purchased in either eBook or paperback formats at <http://www.pretext.co.za/shop/>].
- Hewitt, P. (2003). *The looked after kid: Memoirs from the children's home*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.
- Holzschelter, A. (2010). *Children's rights in international politics: The transformative power of discourse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kahan, B. (1979). *Growing up in care: Ten people talking*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lau, E. (1989). *Runaway: Diary of a street kid*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins.
- Little, M., & Kelly, S. (1995). *A life without problems? The achievements of a therapeutic community*. Aldershot, UK / Brookfield, VT: Arena-Ashgate.
- Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomson, J., & Harries, M. (2009). *Reforming child protection*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro review of child protection: Final report – A child-centred system*. London: Department of Education.
- Owen, J. (1996). *Every childhood lasts a lifetime: Personal stories from the frontlines of family breakdown*. Brisbane: Australian Association of Young People in Care.
- Raychaba, B. (1988). *To be on our own with no direction from home*. Ottawa, ON: National Youth in Care Network.
- Raychaba, B. (1993). *Pain, lots of pain: Family violence and abuse in the lives of young people in care*. Ottawa, ON: National Youth in Care Network.
- Schofield, G., Moldestad, B., Höjer, I., Ward, E., Skilbred, D., & Young, J. (2010). Managing loss and a threatened identity: Experience of parents of children growing up in foster care, the perspective of their social workers and implications for practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(5), 1-19.
- Scott, D., Arney, F., & Vimparni, G. (2010). Think child, think family, think community. In F. Arney, & D. Scott (eds.), *Working with vulnerable families: A partnership approach* (pp. 7-28). Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
- Seita, J., Mitchell, M., & Tobin, C. (1996). *In whose best interest? One child's odyssey, a nation's responsibility*. Toronto: Continental Press.
- Ten Brummelaar, M. D. C., Kalverboer, M. E., Harder, A. T., Post, W. J., Zijlstra, A. E., & Knorth, E. J. (2014). The Best Interest of the Child Self-report questionnaire (BIC-S): Results of a participatory development procedure. *Child Indicators Research*, 7(3), 569-588, doi: 10.1007/s12187-013-9225-3.