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Notions of safety: observing cultural perspectives in a homeless youth hostel

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ABSTRACT

The preservation of a person's ontological security plays a vital role in the cultural formation of social groups. Using ethnographic data, the following paper demonstrates how young people, who reside in homeless hostels deal with feelings of anxiety and ontological insecurity. The paper argues that within the institutional setting of a homeless youth hostel, norms and values from outside of the hostel are reproduced by residents, to repair their ontological security. Younger residents become confronted with new levels of independence and freedom, which can prompt anxiety, negatively impacting upon their ontological security. It is contended that, to repair ontological security, and counter anxiety, those from similar cultural backgrounds gravitate toward one another and replicate the cultural norms and values to which they are accustomed.

Introduction

The following paper is based on a one-year ethnographic study at a homeless youth hostel in Wales, UK. The ethnographic work was carried out by the first author who has over 10 years' experience of working as a youth worker across south Wales. The paper discusses the subjectivity of ontological security across different cultural groups. It questions how safety is engendered for young people within an institutional setting such as a homeless youth hostel. In doing so, the paper considers that there is a negative impact on ontological security when young people come to a homeless hostel from different social and cultural backgrounds. It shall be argued that, to repair ontological security, and as a protection against feelings of anxiety, young people from similar cultural backgrounds are inclined to form groups. This often happens in an attempt to reproduce the cultural environments that they are already accustomed to. Many of the young people accessing the hostel discussed in this paper, come from communities that are characterised by distinct a working-class identity. The geographic locations that many of the residents come from encompass the surrounding communities and housing estates. Many of which are renowned for being marginalised or disadvantaged. Young people from these areas are often brandished by territorial stigma which can leave them feeling isolated or socially excluded from conventional middle-class society (Anderson 2022; Campbell 1993; McKenzie 2015; Slater 2018; Yates 2006). They are often associated with unconventional cultures which are sometimes deemed intimidating to those who are unfamiliar with them. It is posited that by coming together as a group that shares similar norms and values, they

reproduce a version of the culture that they are accustomed to, and therefore repair their ontological security. However, it is noted that this can include the reproduction of cultures that might be perceived as alien or dangerous to other young people or staff members at the hostel. Particularly when thinking about young people who are already embedded in cultures that embrace some norms and values that contrast those of middle-class, mainstream society (e.g. estate cultures, street cultures, and drug cultures).

The ethnographic data highlights some of the insecurities experienced by young people when they enter an institutional setting such as a homeless youth hostel. It shall illustrate how the notion of safety is linked to culture and can differ across various groups in society. The contradictory nature of culture is alluded to, and it is acknowledged that culture can often be viewed as being simultaneously liberating and oppressive (Bauman 1999). Bauman (1999) recognises that culture is by no means a static concept and it is largely influenced by human action or *Praxis*. Culture is therefore a continuous negotiation through interaction. In addition, the paper identifies and explores the three theoretical perspectives outlined by Martin (2002). These ideas are especially useful when thinking about cultural formation in institutional settings such as a homeless youth hostel. The culture of the hostel is highly dependent on the norms and values embraced by those who reside there. Sometimes this means that the dominant culture can embody norms and values that run in opposition to what is deemed as conventional culture (e.g. street cultures). Consequently, the hostel culture might be seen as normal and safe to those familiar with the ways of the street, but alien and dangerous to others who may be unfamiliar with them.

The first part of this paper explores the complex idea of 'culture', outlining two contrasting paradigms of thought. Secondly, it explains how interpretivist understandings of culture can result in opaque uncertainty when considering concepts such as safety. Through listening to the voices of the residents, this paper demonstrates that young people possess different ontological frameworks of external reality. As pointed out by Giddens (1984), ontological frameworks of external reality are often influenced consciously and subconsciously by a person's social environment and the culture that they are a part of. This is important when considering what a resident brings to the hostel. It is recognised that many young people who become homeless come from disadvantaged families and lower socio-economic communities (Buchanan et al. 2010; Quilgars, Johnsen, and Pleace 2008). Recognising that young people's understanding of the world varies, the study indicates that some of the residents do not fully identify with what might be deemed as the conventional middle-class norms and values that are promoted at the hostel through its staff members. To some people, middle-class culture can be deemed as unfamiliar, with certain aspects being viewed as illegitimate from their own cultural perspective. The paper argues that the contradictory nature of the homeless youth hostel creates much uncertainty for the residents. This can prompt feelings of insecurity and anxiety amongst the young people who live there. Feelings of dissociation and alienation can encourage young people to search form groups that operate on norms and values that are familiar to them. When this happens, they achieve a sense of belonging and identity, allowing them to reproduce an ontological framework of external reality that they are more familiar with, therefore enabling them to restore their ontological security.

Discussing culture: positivism, interpretivism & Bauman

The concept of culture is complex and has been described as one of the most complicated words in the English language (Williams 1976/2014). However, there are two main schools of thought that attempt to define culture. The first explanation of the term derives from the positivist school of thought; this recognises culture as a process of cultivation. The positivist interpretation of culture is associated with the idea that something is grown or being brought to fruition. A cultivation understanding of the culture recognises it as something that must be nurtured, tended, and developed. This school of thought therefore views culture as a process with an end goal or telos. When considering this interpretation of culture, it should be noted that if there is a universal form of culture that all

should strive for – a good culture – then any other form of culture that differs from the universal forms is wrong. Jenks (1993) describes this interpretation of culture as being a process of transition that is bound by a hierarchy. Additionally, he points out that this version of culture is closely linked to ideas of civilisation, education, socialisation, and colonisation (Jenks 1993). This positivist understanding of culture was widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century (see. Arnold 1869/2009; Bentham 1798/2007; Eliot 1948/1988).

The interpretivist school argues that culture is democratic and developed through interactions between people. Williams (1976) shared this view and argued that culture is multifaceted, and at its most basic level, culture is a way of life. Trice and Beyer (1984) argued that culture involved the 'system of … publicly and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at a given time' (654). In this context, 'values and beliefs are both created by and revealed to members of organisations and those with whom they interact' (Dawson 1996, 142). Institutions can encompass different types of culture which reflect 'their particular history and circumstances of definite groups within organisations' (Salaman 1979, 184). In addition, theoretical concerns have moved beyond structure in terms of authority, rules and rational choice and further emphasised values, norms, assumptions, and beliefs (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; Schein 2017). Indeed, values, norms, assumptions, and beliefs that may be identified in wider social situations and historical processes are usually essential when understanding the notion of culture. As pointed out by Geertz (1993, 2) 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun'. Furthermore, an analysis of these webs should be seen as a search for meaning rather than an experimental science in search of law.

A third view of culture (and one primarily applied in this paper) is discussed by Bauman (1999), who recognises the two opposing views of culture and describes the pair as being paradoxical in their nature, but also interdependent on one another. He says that culture 'is the ambivalence between 'creativity' and 'normative regulation' (Bauman 1999, XV). He therefore recognises the two opposing ideas of culture as being two sides of the same coin. This is a key area of consideration when thinking about culture in an institutional setting. If an unconventional form of culture is allowed to flourish, those who are only familiar with a mainstream conventional culture are at risk of being oppressed. Yet, it's critical to understand that these dynamics operate in both directions. Therefore, young people coming from cultures which are deemed as unconventional in the eyes of middle class society, may also feel alienated when the dominant hostel culture reflects that of middle-class conventional culture.

When commenting on cultural formation on a societal level, Bauman (1999, xx) points out that 'The image of culture as a workshop in which the steady pattern of society is repaired and kept in shape chimed together with the perception of all things cultural – values, behavioural norms, artifacts – forming a *system*'. Consequently, it might be argued that the development of culture is largely influenced and guided by systems that are constructed, maintained and transformed through social practice. When commenting on organisational culture, Martin (2002) outlines three theoretical views of culture which include integrative, differentiated, and fragmented perspectives. Culture is divided into these perspectives with a focus on 'orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations and orientation to ambiguity' (95). Integration involves organisation-wide consensus, manifestation consistency, and the exclusion of ambiguity. Differentiation sub-culture consensus, manifestation inconsistency, and ambiguity channelled externally to the existing sub-cultures. Fragmentation incorporates a lack of consensus, ambiguity regarding consistency and inconsistency, and the acknowledgment that ambiguity exists. So, the integration perspective focuses on consistent manifestations of culture or mutually consistent interpretations of culture whereas the differentiation perspective concentrates on inconsistency of these cultural manifestations. Fragmentation perspective conceptualises relationships between inconsistent and consistent manifestations when there exists opaqueness between the interpretations. Although they are talking about cultural development at different levels, both Bauman (1999) and Martin (2002) recognise the repressive nature that culture can have upon individuals. Like Bauman (1999), Martin (2002) highlights conflicting definitions of culture, where integrative and fragmented perspectives disagree on the role of

'ambiguity' in organisational culture. Although ambiguity can activate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Moxnes 2018), it is an important feature that ensures that culture is not static (Bauman 1999). This paper provides the basis for an integration of these approaches when pursuing an understanding of notions of culture in relation to ontological security within a homeless youth hostel. The notion of system consensus and consistency in relation to culture is general and sub-cultures are fundamental areas of consideration. Particularly when understanding the development of culture in an institutional setting such as a homeless youth hostel. This is an ethical dilemma that calls into question, whether or not, hostel culture can/should be guided or manipulated by those responsible for the running of the hostel.

Culture is an important variable when one thinks about common, everyday concepts such as 'safety'. Many varied factors might influence whether an individual feels safe or not. Some of these factors could include an individual's socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, or religion; all of which possess their own individual cultures. Sometimes, young people are part of overlapping cultures that have norms and values that run in contrast to middle-class mainstream culture (Anderson 1999, 2022; Baron 2006, 2013; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Lankenau et al. 2005; Miller 1958; Yates 2006). The residents of youth hostels are made up of young people coming from a wide range of diverse cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds. All of which can influence the development of the culture within the hostel. Consequently, the form of culture that develops in the hostel and the social background of its residents will influence their opinion of how 'safe' the hostel is.

Ontological security: trust, anxiety and fear

Giddens (1995) addresses the complex idea of ontological security in relation to social being, identity, and culture. He recognises ontological security as being a 'protective cocoon' which is developed by a caregiver (parent) throughout childhood (Giddens 1995). Recognising ontological security as being a 'framework of reality', Giddens (1995, 36) describes it as being a trust system that blocks out certain negative possibilities of everyday life. He describes ontological security as 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 1990, 92). Giddens (1995, 44–45) acknowledges that there are both 'fears' and 'anxieties'. He contends that fear represents a response to a specific threat (conscious) and anxiety represents a 'perceived threat of integrity of the social system of an individual' (unconscious). Here, Giddens (1995, 44) points out that everyone has developed 'a framework of ontological security … based on routines of various forms'. Arguing that anxieties are learned from the caregiver, he highlights that anxiety emerges when someone's social system is under threat; therefore, negatively impacting an individual's ontological security. Consequently, it can be deduced that ideas around safety are subjective and heavily dependent on an individual's perception of reality, this is largely influenced by their culture.

In the field of Sociology, it is widely recognised that 'When people cherish some set of values and do not feel any threat to them, they experience well-being. When they cherish values but do feel them to be threatened, they experience a crisis—either as a personal trouble or as a public issue. And if all their values seem involved, they feel the total threat of panic … That is the experience of uneasiness, of anxiety, which, if it is total enough, becomes a deadly unspecified malaise' (Mills 1959/2000, 11). When an individual's values come under threat, their framework of reality is jeopardised leaving them feeling anxious and unsafe. Before one can explore the notion of safety, it must be noted that the concept is highly subjective and is often dependent on a person's specific culture. Laing (1960/2010) argued that one displays ontological security when individuals experience their 'own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth; as spatially coextensive with the body; and, usually, as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security' (41–42). Ontological security becomes present when an individual

'fails to display this stable sense of being … and identity and autonomy are always in question. The individual 'may lack the experience of … temporal continuity, … not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness … and (be) unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable' (author's brackets. Laing 1960/2010, 42). Giddens (1995) builds on this definition identified by Laing (1960/2010) as well as Erikson (1950) who argued that identity is a means of controlling anxiety and provides a mechanism for ensuring trust, predictability, and control, as a reaction to disruptive change through re-establishing previous identities or developing new ones. Giddens and Erikson determine that self-identity involves the development of a persistent feeling of biographical continuity where actors can sustain a narrative about the self and deal with investigations and interrogations relating to acting and being. Ontological security involves an individual's 'fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people. Obtaining such trust becomes necessary in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety' (Giddens 1995, 38–39). Existential anxiety creates absurdity by undermining the taken-for-granted sense that things exist for a reason.

It is common that the young people in the hostel will have recently separated from a familiar group, such as the family, and instead entered a social setting that is somewhat alien to them. Fromm (1942/2004) recognises that separation from a group, and a process of 'individuation', can result in a person experiencing severe anxiety, aloneness, and doubt. Fromm (1942/2004) argues that being a part of a group offers identity and security. Influenced by the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Fromm recognises that leaving a group often results in the individual becoming 'alone and free, yet powerless and afraid' (Fromm 1942/2004, 28). He argues that 'growing separation [from a group] may result in an isolation that has the quality of desolation and creates intense anxiety and insecurity' (Fromm 1942/2004, 25). Fromm (1942/2004, 25) contends that this can often result in a 'new kind of closeness and solidarity with others'. As well as being confronted with loneliness, young people who enter the hostel are also faced with new risks. This can also function as a push factor to encourage young people to come together and form new groups. Beck (1992) argues that in a risk society, common anxieties can offer individuals a common ground and therefore promote a level of social solidarity. He recognises 'safety' as being a driving force of community (Beck 1992). Therefore, when young people feel alone and at risk in the hostel, it encourages the emergence, formation, and reproduction of the cultural norms and values that residents are comfortable with.

When considering the above in relation to ontological security, it is worth noting that in an institutional setting such as the hostel, individuals from different social backgrounds can therefore repair their ontological security through replicating the social system they are accustomed to. This would mean engaging with others who share similar norms and values as themselves. If it is the case that a majority of the hostel residents come from a particular geographical area or social background, it could result in the hostel culture being replicated to be more complementary to that of the majority. Group formation has long been recognised as a practical method to ensure human safety and survival (Barchas 1976; Mobbs et al. 2015). Additionally, groups offer individuals a sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Crocker and Luhtanen 1990; Maslow 2015; Tajfel 1981). However, when the formation of a group results in the reproduction and dominance of a particular culture, this can potentially become a threat to another's framework of reality.[1] Therefore, resulting in other young people experiencing anxiety or fear, due to their ontological security being damaged through entering an alternative culture. For example, a young person who identifies solely with the norms and values of mainstream middle-class culture might feel estranged from the norms and values that align to a street culture. This is an example of how culture through praxis results in ambiguity and can be interpreted simultaneously as liberating or oppressive to different social groups (Bauman 1999).

Methodology

The methodology adopted a constructivist ethnographic paradigm of inquiry. One that recognises social reality as being constructed through a series of social interactions between individuals in

society. It acknowledges individuals to be 'defined and determined by ideology, power, politics and culture' (Howell, 2013 , 127). This form of ethnography rejects the idea of realism and instead 'por-tray[s] people as constructing the social world, both through interpretations of it and through actions based on interpretations' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995 , 11). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that the positivist school is unsuitable for carrying out qualitative research such as eth-nography. They recognise that a key criticism of positivist researchers is that qualitative research lacks rigour and is subjective. Therefore, taking an interpretivist view of culture is more suitable for qualitative methods of data collection. Based on an interpretivism paradigm, naturalist ethnogra-phy recognises that it is important for researchers to submerge themselves within a social group to better understand a group's culture. A positivist ethnographer learns about social situations from observation, and the interpretivist ethnographer learns about the social world through direct engagement. Therefore, a naturalist ethnographic approach was considered most methodologically appropriate for the study. Additionally, it was this interpretivist understanding of reality that has guided the researcher to recognise the subjectivity of concepts such as security especially when con-sidering different cultural understandings and worldviews.

Spending a prolonged period at the hostel provided meaningful insight into the lives of the young homeless people and the daily challenges that they faced. The study took an inductive process of data collection, adopting a theoretical coding framework to guide the data analysis throughout the duration of the fieldwork (Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, 2018). Coffey and Atkin-son (1996) point out that, although coding is an important part of the data analysis process, it is not data analysis itself. They suggest linking codes to segments of data and then creating categories that relate to concepts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). They view coding as an opportunity to go beyond the data, by thinking creatively, asking questions, and generating theories and frameworks (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) argue that once the coding is done in a systematic way, the researcher can then generate analytic categories, memos, and integrative memos. Time, practice and wider reading, enabled the researcher to gain more self-assurance when engaging with the coding process (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). This grounded theoretical approach allowed the researcher to identify codes and revisit them with the young people whilst carrying out participatory observations. Therefore, the initial data collection informed the development of the methodology inductively. The themes developed throughout the participatory observations and interviews were revisited in the focus group. This process of data collection was useful when carrying out research in a constantly changing social dynamic, whilst ensuring that the voices of the participants were heard.

Methods

The fieldwork included over 400 h of participatory observations, 9 semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and a focus group with the young people at the hostel. As previously mentioned, the first author worked as a youth worker for ten years prior to carrying out research in this study.[2] Before the research took place, an in-depth ethics application was made to minimise the potentialities of harm to all of those included in the study. To gain informed consent from the residents, weekly house meetings were arranged that explained the researcher's role whilst he engaged with the residents at the hostel. It was made very clear to the residents that they did not have to participate, and an information sheet was created with a photo of the researcher on it. These were put up on the walls around the hostel. Imbalances of power were considered very carefully and to try and compen-sate for any power imbalances, a decision was made for the researcher to abstain from entering the hostel until all the residents that the researcher personally knew had moved out.[3] Once there were all new residents, the researcher re-entered the hostel, but this time they introduced themselves as a researcher – not a staff member. The researcher was honest with the residents, explaining that he used to work at the hostel. However, it was clarified to them that he deliberately ended his contract of employment so that he could guarantee the residents maximum anonymity through the duration

of the study. Due to the researcher's existing knowledge as a staff member at the hostel, they wanted to minimise their existing assumptions of the hostel to maximise the clarity of the voices of the young people who lived there. Aware of the kaleidoscopic nature of the hostel culture, he endeavoured to view the hostel as a new environment altogether. Only through recognising one's own existing personal bias can the researcher maximise objectivity when engaging in social research. Therefore, the data collection took place through four inductive stages.

Stage one consisted of submerging oneself in the field as an observer – only in the communal areas of the hostel. Just being present at the hostel made the residents curious and they eventually began to engage with the researcher on their own accord. Avoiding the initiation of the interaction presented fertile ground for the resident to direct the narrative of the interaction. Once a level of rapport had been established, the second stage of data collection involved more participation – often taking place in the resident's rooms or the outdoor areas surrounding the hostel. These interactions were more likely to be initiated by the researcher and they were guided by the things that were discussed in the previous stage of data collection. The third stage of data collection involved semi-structured interviews. These were used to ensure that the voices of the residents who did not use the communal areas of the hostel were included in the study. Interview schedules were created using the themes that emerged during the previous two stages. Semi-structured interviews were always pre-arranged with the participants. They took place in private, sometimes away from the hostel, and were always on a one-to-one basis. There were also unstructured interviews which sometimes included one or two residents. Unstructured interviews were spontaneous and took place alongside the participatory observations. The unstructured interviews enabled the researcher to openly take direct notes or record conversations with participants without it having a vastly negative impact on the naturalism of the interaction.

The following table gives details of the interviews that were carried out during the study.

Interview	Type of interview	Participant/s	Length of time	Location
1	Unstructured	Mia and Kenton	86 min	Mia's Room
2	Semi-structured	Mia	47 min	Lounge
3	Semi-structured	Rhian	35 min	Rhian's room
4	Semi-structured	Michael	34 min	Michael's room
5	Semi-structured	Olly	30 min	Lounge
6	Unstructured	Skyla	55 min	Skyla's room
7	Semi-structured	Becky	17 min	Lounge
8	Semi-structured	April	35 min	Lounge
9	Semi-structured	James	50 min	James' flat (away from hostel)

As mentioned in the previous section, much of the data was analysed alongside the data collection process. As the data was coded, these areas were consistently revisited which allowed the development of themes. At each stage of the data collection process, themes were brought forward and discussed within the different social contexts. The fourth and final phase of data collection was the focus group, which included five of the hostel residents. The focus group was set up to allow everyone in the hostel to discuss the themes. However, only the residents who were part of the main group joined. The following main themes that arose from the prior stages of research were discussed:

- identity
- peer influences
- role models
- social networks
- ideas about safety
- privileges and deterrents in the hostel
- honour

- respect
- toughness
- rules

During the focus group, vignettes were used to help stimulate discussion amongst the participants. The vignettes described two different fictional young people coming from different social backgrounds who lived at the hostel. One of which came from more of an affluent background than the other. These descriptions of the fictional residents comprised an amalgamation of characteristics of some of the young people whom the researcher had worked with over the past ten years. Vignettes allowed the participants to freely express their thoughts in front of their peers without the danger of repercussions that may arise from discussing real people.

Throughout the entire ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher engaged with a total of twenty-five residents. They also engaged with many of the resident's friends and family members, and the staff members who worked at the hostel. Many of the residents moved in and out during the ethnography. However, there was always nine young people residing there. The following table demonstrates this, providing details of the young people involved in the study. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the entirety of the study to protect the participants from any potential repercussions that may occur from the things that they shared with the researcher.

Pseudonym of young people	Age	Gender	Time involved as a research participant	Engaged in research from the start?	Reason for leaving
Zac	17	Male	4 months	Yes	Evicted
Vicky	21	Female	2 months	Yes	Evicted
Kenton	16	Male	11 months	Yes	Evicted
Mia	16	Female	9 months	Yes	Moved on
Keith	16	Male	1 month	Yes	Evicted
Rhian	17	Female	5 months	Yes	Moved into own property
Emilia	17	Female	5 months	Yes	Moved into own property
Brandon	16	Male	2 months	No	Sent to prison
Ethan	17	Male	9 months	No	Moved back with parents
Logan	16	Male	6 months	No	Abandonment[4]
Michael	18	Male	6 months	No	Moved into other supported accommodation
Seren	17	Female	11 months	No	Evicted
Olly	21	Male	6 months	No	Moved into own property
Skyla	18	Female	4 months	No	Evicted
Henry	16	Male	10 months	No	Moved into own property
Leah	16	Female	5 months	No	Moved into own property
Becky	16	Female	4 months	No	Moved into own property and later returned to hostel, before being evicted.
April	16	Female	1 month	No	Moved into own property
James	16	Male	2 months	No	Moved into own property
Bilbo	17	Male	9 months	No	Evicted
Thomas	18	Male	2 months	No	Evicted
Damion	21	Male	1 month	No	Moved into own property
Mo	16	Male	1 month	No	Moved into own property

Empirical context

The hostel where the research took place aims to provide residents with practical support to enable them to become able to live independently. This idea of progressing towards independent living has been described by Sahlin (2005, 1) as a 'staircase to transition'. Within this model, she recognises that the 'progression' towards independent living in the hostel, results in more autonomy for the service user. Eventually, the resident is deemed by the organisation as being capable of living alone in their own flat/house. Once this happens, they move out of the hostel and are provided with a reduced

level of support which allows them to live alone in the community. However, this form of 'progress' is very much aligned with the demands and expectations of a middle-class conventional culture that is required to access mainstream housing.

The organisation that manages the hostel aims to ensure that the resident's rights are promoted and respected, allowing them to make their own choices in life. The hostel staff members were encouraged to act as advocates for the young people who live there, taking a rights-based approach to delivering services.[5] Rights are required because they engender the common good 'through the recognition by members of society of powers in each other contributory to a common good and the regulation of those powers by that recognition' (Green, 1999, 19). The service that is provided by the hostel is therefore one that should guide the residents to act in ways which are in line with the conventional norms and values that will allow them to transition into independent living (e.g. engage in education or training, budget money, or manage time). However, at the same time, the service provided by the hostel should not infringe on the resident's rights to make their own life choices. When working with young people, practitioners are conscious about the impact that interventions will have upon the lives of those that they work with. Practical guidance will often encourage them to 'weigh up any possible intervention against the rights of individuals and the effect it will have on their independence' (Martin 2007, 13). With this guidance in mind, one should consider that some of the residents accessing the hostel identify with cultures that run in contrast to conventional middle-class culture. When using the 'staircase to transition' as a metaphor, some young people are much further down the staircase than others. It is often the case that many of those accessing the hostel will not recognise the importance of some of the norms and values that are promoted by the hostel. Therefore, they can fail to meet the desired criteria that are needed for them to move out of the hostel, resulting in them residing in the hostel for prolonged periods. Subsequently, this can result in an accumulation of young people who do not conform to mainstream culture, residing at the hostel together. When this happens, their interests can align, influencing the dominant culture which exists within the hostel. They form groups that directly influence the hostel culture, which has an immediate impact on new residents who come to live there.

This paper draws attention to some of the complications that can occur when a service is provided, with what could be described, as having contradictory objectives. Much of the criteria that are to be met by the residents for them to become capable of living independently require them to embrace, what might be described as a conventional lifestyle. Therefore, if residents choose to follow an unconventional path, they will fail to meet the specific criterion that is required for them to move out of the hostel. Consequently, the culture of a hostel plays a fundamental role in influencing the actions of residents, further impacting their ability to transition into independent living. Without the implementation of clear boundaries, guided by the staff members in the hostel, the norms, values, and conventions, which exist there become largely dictated by the residents.

On reflection of his experiences of working in a psychiatric ward in the 1970s, Moxnes (2018) argues that a lack of structure in institutional settings can result in primordial anxiety. He suggests that when this happens, residents can become overwhelmed by the uncertainty of spontaneity and fluidity. When thinking about this example in relation to the hostel, it might be assumed that a lack of formal structure can result in some of the residents experiencing heightened levels of primordial anxiety which could even deter some young people from wanting to stay at the hostel. These examples highlight how this form of housing provision can become contradictory when its culture is influenced by the residents, rather than the staff members that manage the hostel. Staff members find themselves in a contradictory position where they are expected to empower the young people they work with whilst dissuading them from making choices that may be detrimental to their transitional journey into independent living. Peace and Holland (2001) discuss the paradoxical nature of residential homes for older people.

They draw attention to many of the contrasting characteristics that can create dilemmas within organisations that provide housing services. For example, informality in opposition to regulation,

normalisation opposed to specialisation, and personal opposed to professional. Hoolachan and Howell (2024) argue that this paradoxical nature results in the residents living in a limbo-like state of precarity. Not only are they suspended in a position of uncertainty due to their lack of housing, but they are also exposed to an additional layer of doubt and confusion, which is largely created through contrasting characteristics of the place that they call 'home' (Hoolachan and Howell 2024; Whitehead 2017; Wilhoit Larson 2021).

Contrasting characteristics demonstrate how interactions that take place between staff and residents are continually shaped and negotiated by all of those who engage in the setting. Peace and Holland's (2001) work demonstrate why these services need to be managed with additional care. They point out that the provision of housing is a finely tuned balance where too much regulation can result in people feeling like they live in a total institution. However, in contrast to their argument, a lack of regulation can result in the adoption of norms and values related to unconventional cultures, which can have a detrimental impact on the residents of an establishment such as a homeless youth hostel.

Hostel culture

Many of the communities surrounding the hostel are recognised as being deprived neighbourhoods by the Welsh Government Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). Throughout the duration of the study, a vast majority of those living at the hostel came from social housing areas or the council estates that surround the city centre. Most of these locations are made up of post-industrial, working-class communities which possess their own unique culture. Some have high crime rates and are deemed dangerous to those who do not live there. Yates (2006) points out that young people coming from housing estate communities can sometimes feel alienated by middle-class mainstream culture. The young people who he spoke to said that, regardless to the negative reputation of their community, they much felt safer within the estate that they were from (Yates 2006). This point has also been made by Walklate (2002, 84) who argues that 'High crime areas can be experienced as highly ordered and safer places for people who live there'. Research carried out by Levy, Santhakumaran, and Whitecross (2014 , 40) found that 'In areas characterised by high levels of unemployment, crime, and social exclusion, individuals who live in the area may have strong extended family and friendship networks, but very few links to those outside the community'. Therefore, if the hostel develops a culture that is similar to that of a deprived area that a resident comes from, it could result in them feeling much safer there. However, this works both ways, and it could result in others feeling unsafe because they are unfamiliar with the culture of deprived areas.

In his ethnographic study of a housing estate in the north of England, Yates (2006) found that a specific culture existed in the housing estate; one which was governed by its own set of rules. He comments on how young people from the area felt that those living outside of the estate, viewed them negatively. He contended that 'Young people identified an element of community cohesion on the Estate intrinsically linked with traditional working-class extended family networks that facilitated a feeling of safety and arguably an element of solidarity in the face of the negative regard in which the estate was held' (Yates 2006, 198). Describing the area as a little village, one of his respondents defended the area, saying that it is not as dangerous as people make out (Yates 2006). This view was also found by Walklate (1998) whose respondents expressed the importance of 'belonging' to a community as a deterrence from being a victim of a crime. Her research demonstrated how deprived areas have a unique culture that places emphasis on family and kinship. One of the local police officers she spoke to, described the whole area as being 'one big family' or a 'clan' (Walklate 1998, 556). Gill (1977) found that when an area gets a bad reputation, it can have a negative impact on the lives of its residents because they become labelled. He comments on how their membership in a certain community can prevent them from entering education and employment. He argues that stigmatisation of communities

can result in a process of self-fulfilling prophecy (Gill 1977). This results in residents from particular areas acknowledging a certain identity, which can go on to influence their behaviour. Arguably, this could influence the culture of the hostel when many of its residents are from certain towns, villages, or housing estates.

As well as being influenced by the communities that residents are part of, the hostel culture is also influenced by the wider youth culture that exists in the city. Lankenau et al. (2005) found that a specific street culture exists amongst young homeless people; one that values 'street competencies' such as buying and selling drugs, sex work, and shoplifting. They argue that young homeless people develop street competencies through engaging with more experienced youths. Baron (2013) argues that when delinquent subcultures form, delinquent peers will often reward negative behaviour, such as violence, and punish positive behaviour. This has been described by Anderson (1999) as a 'code of the street' – an unwritten set of rules, which governs the way that people should behave whilst attempting to manoeuver the complex terrain of the street. Anderson (1999) points out that the social exclusion of inner-city communities, in the US can result in the formation of street cultures. This takes place in certain geographical locations, and those subscribing to mainstream norms and values – 'decent families' – can become vulnerable to the members of the street culture – 'street families' (Anderson 1999). When this happens, it is often the case that 'decent families' are encouraged to subscribe to the street culture as a survival mechanism. He explains how families who are polite and considerate to others, are sometimes forced to teach their children unconventional norms and values, enabling them to endure life in a 'street-orientated environment' (Anderson 1999, 33).

Due to the mixture of cultural backgrounds of the residents living there, the norms and values of the hostel sometimes became influenced by 'street culture' (Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Lankenau et al. 2005). As previously mentioned, the hostel population was often made up of an accumulation of young people who do not subscribe to the norms and values promoted by the hostel staff. Long-term residents join together as a group and embrace the oppositional norms and values of the street. This can result in new residents being faced with the choice of joining a group, which operates in line with street values, or not engaging with other young people in the hostel. The young people who participated in the observation and interviews described this as 'keeping yourself to yourself'. However, they warned that not joining a group may result in young people becoming excluded from the social network of the hostel, or their status within the hostel being reduced. Additionally, those who do not conform to the main group can experience bullying and isolation whilst they reside at a youth hostel. Through engaging with the dominant group, they enter a social contract that requires them to subscribe to the existing group culture, therefore influencing their behaviour. Choosing not to abide by the rules of the group breaks the social contact and results in them becoming expelled from the group.

So far, this paper has described the complex nature of the culture that exists in a homeless youth hostel. Using the theoretic idea of ontological security, it argues that when young people enter a hostel, they can gravitate towards those from similar social backgrounds. This can result in the reproduction of the social systems that most of the residents are part of. However, to some residents, these social systems may seem unfamiliar or sometimes somewhat alien. When this happens, they become confronted with the choice to join the group and embrace an alien culture or avoid the group and reject the culture. This can be viewed as a double-edged sword where either of the choices can be viewed as risky. If they avoid the group, they are in danger of being targeted by the group members. If they join a group, they face other dangers such as exposure to drugs and violence or coming into contact with the law. Using empirical data, the following sections demonstrate the diverse ways that residents try to maintain their ontological security whilst residing at the hostel. The first two examples show how distinct cultures are reproduced to repair the ontological security of the residents. The second two examples demonstrate situations where the residents are unfamiliar with the existing culture of the hostel and the actions that they take to try to overcome feelings of ontological insecurity.

Voices from the main group

As previously mentioned, the vignettes described two residents, one coming from an affluent background. When reading the vignettes, I described a boy named Georgie, who came from an affluent background and chose not to engage with the staff and young people whilst residing at the hostel. Many of the young people in the focus group were outraged. They responded with the following[6]:

Becky:	That's a cunt that is …
Bilbo:	That's a little prick …
Becky:	Stupid stuck up wanker, I wanna hit him. Is that a real person?
Researcher:	Georgy?
Leah:	Is that a real person cos I'll hit him.
Researcher:	No, he is made up …
Bilbo:	I will fucking wallop him

I also described a girl called Danielle who was from a big family who lived on a local council estate. She was on probation for assaulting a police officer whilst under the influence of drugs. All the young people in the focus group agreed that she was a 'legend', and that she would hang around in their group if she came to the hostel. When I asked if Georgie would feel safe living at the hostel, Bilbo said 'No, he is too rich mush. He can fuck off, ha ha ha. We will have Danielle'.

This highlights how the young people who engaged with the group responded harshly to young people coming from different cultural backgrounds. It also demonstrates how they became hostile to anybody who chooses not to engage in the group or the culture of the hostel. Furthermore, it revealed the expectations that the group culture imposed on one another whilst they engaged within it. Thinking about this in relation to ontological security, it can be argued that Georgie posed a threat to the young people's 'framework of reality' (Giddens 1995), triggering feelings of insecurity and anxiety. On the other hand, Danielle possessed many of the characteristics that they embraced within their own culture.

Those who have existing contacts in the hostel

Becky had family members who had previously lived at the hostel, and she was already friends with several residents. Knowing other young people in the hostel was a form of social capital that new residents could draw upon when they first moved into the hostel. Sandberg and Pedersen (2009) describe the idea of 'street capital' arguing that social networks on the street often translate into social status. Many young people with existing social networks had positive opinions of the hostel and saw it as a safe place. This demonstrates that they are already familiar with the social system that exists in the hostel and their ontological security does not come under threat. This basic trust system allows them to avoid the existential anxiety that is experienced by those who are unfamiliar with the hostel culture. When I asked Becky what she thought about the hostel before she moved in, she said 'Brilliant here I recon. Cos obviously Leah lives here, and she told me it was brilliant, they helps you do everything'. Becky did not seem to see any potential negative aspects of living at the hostel. Not only was she familiar with the residents, but she also had an excellent knowledge of people who were part of the wider street culture.

When young people assimilate to the hostel culture

Mia offers an example of how residents can sometimes adapt to the culture of the hostel in an attempt to overcome feelings of ontological insecurity. She describes how she became part of a group culture that was unfamiliar to her, by adapting her behaviour to become more aligned with the group members. However, by doing so, she engaged in risky behaviour such as drug use and crime. When I asked Mia how she felt when she moved into the hostel she said 'Scared, I would say I was scared. Keeping myself to myself really; that's what I was doing'. When she

moved in, there was a group of residents similar to those who engaged in the focus group. Mia described how the group of residents dominated the hostel. They would regularly smoke New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and take Valium or MDMA together. She said that the group was unpredictable and there was a lot of violence amongst them. Mia did not like drugs when she first moved in, so she avoided the group. However, the group members became offended by her rejection, and they began to target her. In response to this, she avoided the hostel, spending time hanging around on the streets, and regularly sleeping at friends' houses. Eventually, she was told by the hostel staff that she needed to use her room, or that she would be evicted, and the room would be given to someone who would use it.

Mia said that she only began to feel safer at the hostel when members of the main group began to move out. As the group became smaller, she started to spend more time with them. Eventually, she folded to the peer pressure of the group and started taking drugs with them. In an interview, Mia explained that 'being yourself these days is not how you survive'. After some time, Mia became part of a newly formed group in the hostel and assumed the role of an ambassador who promoted the reproduction of a culture that she had once detested.

When young people chose not to engage with the hostel culture: 'keeping yourself to yourself'

James said that when he first moved into the hostel, he thought the staff were all really welcoming. He thought he was going to be happy there until he was targeted one night, shortly after he moved in. James said:

> Well, there was the one time someone was banging on my door like. I can't remember what time it was; really late. I had training [college] in the morning and that shook me up a bit. I was just settled in like, I was just settled in, like and kind of like just 'let my guard down' type of thing, and felt safe. Then there was banging on my door, shouting to open my door. And then that kind of made me feel 'fuck I don't want to be here anymore'.

James said that after this incident, he was afraid to come out of his room and it also prevented him from being able to speak to staff members when he needed someone to speak to. Not engaging with staff members can cause big problems for young people at the hostel. If they refuse to engage in support, it can stop them from being moved on, or even result in them being in breach of their licence agreement and being evicted. When I asked James about the other young people at the hostel in an interview, he said 'I don't want to stereotype, but you know the type of people you see like in gangs like? I see them as those types of people'.

Discussion

This paper offers theoretical contributions by bringing together Bauman's (1999) societal explanation regarding culture as praxis and Martin's (2002) three theoretical perspectives of culture. Through a reflexive assessment regarding the perspectives of the young people in the field, it became clear that the cultural backgrounds of those living in the hostel fundamentally impacted the development of the hostel culture. Additionally, from the experiences of the researcher participating and observing within the hostel, it was evident that these different cultural backgrounds created ambiguity, therefore allowing the residents more autonomy when influencing the hostel culture. It became clear that many of the residents who came to the hostel initially entered an unfamiliar realm that threatened their framework of reality. In an effort to repair their ontological security, those with common ground joined together to replicate a culture that is more familiar to them. For those who are already accustomed to the norms and values of the emerging culture, the group offers a sanctuary where they can embrace a level of normality whilst living away from their home environment.

From reflecting on experiences whilst undertaking the research it may be suggested that the residents of the hostel come from deprived backgrounds (an integrated perspective) and were more

familiar with the culture that existed within the hostel. Some were more accustomed to a 'street culture' or wider youth culture (differentiated and fragmented perspectives). Those coming from other social backgrounds, who are not accustomed to these cultures, tended to view the culture as being detrimental or dangerous (fragmented perspectives) (Martin 2002). Consequently, if cultures that run-in contrast to conventional middle-class society are replicated in the hostel, some might view the hostel to be a detrimental or dangerous place. If a young person chooses to engage in the hostel culture and join a group, they enter a social contract to exclude ambiguity. These ideas have previously been discussed by Rousseau (1762/2004, 128) in his seminal work, who says that when 'there are opposing voices at a time when a social pact is made, the opposition does not invalidate the contract; it merely excludes the dissidents'. Although Rousseau (1762/2004, 8) would recognise this as true freedom, he points out that 'To renounce freedom is to renounce one's humanity, one's rights as a man [or woman]'. Therefore, young people are freed from abiding by the rules of the dominant hostel group culture, however, by doing so they can also become submissive to those who are part of that group.

Although it may seem that the young people in the hostel have a choice regarding joining a group, some of the push factors must be considered regarding this choice. It became apparent that a lack of opportunities regarding education and training resulted in young people spending lots of time hanging around the hostel and being bored. This was coupled with a lack of incentive for them to get a job or go to college because of complications that could arise with their benefits by doing so. Joining the group in the hostel meant that the young people could avoid isolation and boredom. The social contract will offer them a level of protection from the group but also expect them to subscribe to the cultural customs of the group. It is sometimes the case that doing so will involve behaving in ways that run in contrast to mainstream society, or against the individual's morals. By acting in ways that are distinctive to their conventional lifestyle and entering a new 'framework of reality', they jeopardise their ontological security. A natural response to this is becoming intimidated by the group and choosing to avoid it. This can be through isolating themselves or not returning to the hostel at all. Arguably, their time at the hostel becomes a negative experience and they live their lives in fear of the group. Indeed, a clear indication that three theoretical perspectives of culture may exist within this institutional environment in terms of general integrated consensus, differentiated subculture consensus, and a fragmented lack of consensus regarding cultural norms in relation to safety.

These examples are reminiscent of Bauman's (1999) description of culture which recognises culture as being simultaneously incarcerating and emancipating. The role of the hostel as an institution is to provide practical support to its residents and prepare them for independent living. However, as previously discussed, the hostel staff members were encouraged to promote the autonomy of the residents. This sometimes meant that the hostel lacked a robust system of procedures that was capable of guiding the culture. Thus, resulting in the formation of unconventional cultures, which ran in contrast to the objectives of the hostel, to take root. Furthermore, although these cultures may have been recognised as dangerous to the residents, typically they were overlooked by staff members because the culture existed amongst the hostel residents. Therefore, residents often appeared safe when they were actually afraid. Additionally, reporting incidents to staff members meant breaking the 'no grassing' rule of the hostel, creating a clear divide between residents and staff members.

It should be noted that many of the young people saw the hostel as a safe environment; they had no problems whilst living at the hostel. Despite the young person's experience of the hostel, it must be recognised that adults perceive the hostel differently from young people. They might see the hostel as a safe environment, which protects people from the things which they fear: the cold, the dark, or strangers. However, many of the young people involved in the study described coming to the hostel as entering a domain filled with new dangers and risks. Some of which are equally weighted to the dangers and risks that exists on the street and some were worse. By recognising that young people have a different understanding of safety, can one avoid becoming

positivistic and consequently ethnocentric towards young people. Only through taking an interpretivist understanding of culture can we ensure that young people are better understood allowing them to play active roles in decisions that affect their lives. Although this paper has addressed ideas related to age, class and, ontological security, it should be noted that there is much scope to further consider a wider scope of demographics and include race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Conclusion

This paper offers a unique insight into the lives of a marginalised group in society. It comments on the contradictory nature of homeless services, particularly when providing accommodation to young people. Many of the ideas discussed here, draw attention to the fluid nature of culture as it develops within the confines of an institutional setting. It is recognised that a lack of structure within organisations can result in primordial and existential anxiety, leaving residents feeling insecure. It is pointed out that many young homeless people are already a part of what are deemed to be, unconventional cultures. Meaning that the conventional or mainstream middle-class culture that is promoted by the hostel staff can sometimes be interpreted as unfamiliar, alien, or disagreeable. When this happens, residents become inclined to gravitate toward those who align with the social system, or framework of reality, that they are more familiar with. By reproducing the cultural norms and values that they are most familiar with, they successfully repair their ontological security and overcome feelings of anxiety and insecurity. At times, this means reproducing cultural norms and values that run-in contrast to those promoted by the hostel staff, undermining their chances of transitioning into independent living and elongating their time spent as homeless.

Notes

1. An example here, is if you have a young person coming from an affluent middle-class background into the hostel which is operating on norms and values which are aligned to street culture – or vice versa.
2. The fieldwork was carried out by the first author as part of his PhD research.
3. As the researcher previously worked at the hostel where research took place, he did not return to the hostel for 6 months after ending his employment there.
4. The Abandonment Policy mean that residents could be evicted if they did not spend a minimum of 4 nights a week at the hostel.
5. Due to the hostel being situated in Wales, their policy was guided by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ethos – which has been adopted by the Welsh Government.
6. The responses to this vignette were made in a humorous or flippant manner. The participants seemed gauge one another's reaction through a process of reflexive monitoring, whilst encouraging hostility towards Georgie.

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