

# UC Irvine

## Teaching and Learning Anthropology

### Title

Review of Twelve Weeks to Change a Life: At-Risk Youth in a Fractured State by Max Greenberg

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6vr061s4>

### Journal

Teaching and Learning Anthropology, 3(2)

### Author

Macias, Eric

### Publication Date

2020

### DOI

10.5070/T33250984

### License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> 4.0

## REVIEW

### ***Twelve Weeks to Change a Life: At-Risk Youth in a Fractured State* by Max A. Greenberg**

Oakland, University of California Press, 2019.

Eric Macias

*University at Albany, SUNY*  
*emacias@albany.edu*

Drawing on three years of ethnographic interviews and observations in multiple violence reduction youth programs, Max Greenberg provides a critical examination of the important role they play. Greenberg offers a timely conceptualization of the ways these programs become an extension of the “ephemeral state” that does not provide long-term solutions for social ills, but rather relies on other social actors like not-for-profit community organizations to address such issues (2019, 5).

The book offers five empirical chapters after the introduction. The epilogue provides practical policy suggestions in regard to youth programming. The empirical chapters are rich in detailed stories gathered while Greenberg collected data at Peace Over Violence in Los Angeles. Each chapter provides a different perspective of the dialectical relationship between program employees, youth participants, and the state. Moreover, the book is full of compelling stories and provides insight into the challenges faced by many youth of color in urban areas. However, instead of stigmatizing youth involvement in violence, Greenberg offers a humanizing framework for making sense of their actions.

Greenberg makes several important contributions in this book. For example, with the concept of “policy in person,” he suggests that instead of understanding the state as a massive governing apparatus, youth recognize the state through the “interpersonal interactions” with street-level bureaucrats. Youth program staff are a personification of the state policies aimed at youth labeled “at-risk;” they embody social policies and make decisions that impact youth socially. Consequently, these policies exacerbate inequalities despite program staff’s desire to have a positive social impact (2019, 146).

Greenberg’s development of the theory of “curricularization” is the most significant contribution of the book. Curricularization refers to the way “social problems and issues come to be defined and treated as short-term educational and pedagogical programs” (2019, 48). In essence, social issues of youth labeled “at-risk” are addressed as long as there is an evidence-based programmatic approach to alleviate social barriers and marginality. Curricularization is the state’s approach to managing social and economic problems without actually addressing them. That is, the state passes on the responsibility

of addressing structurally created inequities to “change programs” that deliver such curricula (2019, 12). This theorization is helpful in understanding the “fleeting and distant” state after the implementation of neoliberal social and economic policies which have diminished the social safety net for those most in need.

Greenberg’s book is accessible and can lead to fruitful discussion on various topics and issues, especially in undergraduate-level courses related to youth studies, anthropology of education, and ethnographic methods. Each chapter offers a perspective that can be pedagogically useful as examples of more nuanced youth-related issues. For example, chapter 2 provides an important contextualization of the salience of youth programs in our society. This chapter can be discussed in connection to the neoliberalization of education and youth programming since the 1980s. Chapter 5 is also pedagogically useful in discussing the positive and negative aspects of youth programs. The chapter exemplifies how youth experiences often contradict the curricula they are taught.

While “curricularization” and “policy in person” are important theoretical concepts, they lend themselves to the further development of a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between youth and the state, especially in terms of education and education policy. Courses in education can discuss the flexibility and applicability of these two concepts beyond their relation to violence reduction and prevention programs. Future scholarship can use and apply these concepts beyond the scope of prevention or youth-related programs in order to grasp the way in which the state deals with other social issues for vulnerable populations.

Max Greenberg’s methodological approach can be discussed in-depth in ethnographic methods courses. While the author writes about his methodology as an appendix, the rich ethnographic writing style is exemplary. Students can assess and discuss how Greenberg gathered his data and the potential challenges that may come from doing work with young people. Furthermore, Greenberg’s “ephemeral ethnography” (2019, 187) can be examined in a methods class to further understand its contributions to ethnography. His “ephemeral ethnography” suggests that due to the short duration of preventative programs (most last 12-15 weeks) there is a limitation in the long-term connection and observation with study participants. In his words, “the ephemeral state made it difficult to build the kinds of connections with young people that I had thought necessary for ethnography. ... I did what most [program] facilitators learn to do: form meaningful temporary connection and then forget about them. I learned to make connections one hour a week over twelve weeks” (2019, 189). Moreover, in the midst of a global pandemic that has drastically slowed research because of obvious limitations, it is worth asking if ephemeral ethnography can help us rethink ethnographic approaches in social research.

Moreover, the methodological appendix complements Greenberg’s main argument in chapter 3 where he critiques statistical data as a way of learning and understanding about youth labeled “at-risk.” Reading these two sections of the text makes for a rich conversation about qualitative over quantitative methods and why it is important to

capture a qualitative perspective of the lives of young people enrolled in violence reduction programs.

In summary, Max Greenberg presents youth prevention programs through community-based organizations as an extension of the state that passes on its responsibilities of taking care of its people to these organizations. Overall, this is an insightful book for those who study youth labeled “at-risk” or youth programs that offers an analysis suggesting that preventative programs are also part of a social problem instead of an alternative or solution to them. In addition, this is an important book that can be utilized in a variety of educational settings with interests ranging from youth studies to methodological research.

## Reference

Greenberg, Max A. 2019. *Twelve Weeks to Change a Life: At-Risk Youth in a Fractured State*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.