



## Research paper

# The material, moral, and affective worlds of dealing and crime among young men entrenched in an inner city drug scene



Danya Fast<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Jean Shoveller<sup>a,c</sup>, Thomas Kerr<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, St. Paul's Hospital, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Department of Medicine, University of British Columbia, Canada

<sup>c</sup> School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 20 June 2016

Received in revised form 3 January 2017

Accepted 4 January 2017

## Keywords:

Youth

Drug scene

Drug dealing

Crime

Boredom

Morality

## ABSTRACT

A large body of previous research has elucidated how involvement in drug dealing and crime among marginalized urban youth who use drugs is shaped by the imperatives of addiction and survival in the context of poverty. However, a growing body of research has examined how youth's involvement in these activities is shaped by more expansive desires and moralities. In this paper, we examine the material, moral, and affective worlds of loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime among one group of young men in Vancouver, Canada. Drawing on longitudinal interviews with 44 young men from 2008 to 2016, and ethnographic fieldwork with a group of approximately 15 of those young men over the same time period, we argue that for these youth, dealing and crime were not solely about economic survival, or even the accrual of highly meaningful forms of "street capital" in the margins. Rather, as "regimes of living," dealing and crime also opened up new value systems, moral logics, and affects in relation to the tremendous risks, potential rewards, and crushing boredom of life in the margins. These activities were also understood as a way into deeply desired forms of social spatial belonging in the city, which had previously only been imagined. However, across time dealing and crime "embedded" young men in cycles of incarceration, destitution, addictions, and mental health crises that ultimately reinforced their exclusion—from legal employment, but also within the world of crime. The findings of this study underscore the importance of adopting a life course perspective in order to meaningfully address the harms associated with involvement in dealing and crime among youth in our setting.

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Involvement in drug dealing and crime among "hypermarginalized" (Lopez, 2014) urban youth who use drugs often results in exposure to violence, trauma, and incarceration (Hayley & Jane, 2016; Karandinos, Hart, Castrillo, & Bourgois, 2014; Ralph, 2014; Windle & Briggs, 2015b). The synergy of using and dealing drugs in the context of entrenched marginalization also generates risks and harms that extend beyond these. Epidemiological research indicates that continued involvement in the drug trade is associated with many of the behaviors (e.g., intensive crack cocaine and opiate use) that heighten the risk of HIV and hepatitis C infection, as well as fatal overdose (Bargagli, Sperati, Davoli, Forastiere, & Perucci, 2001; Kerr, 2008; Mathers et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, street entrenched youth – and in particular, young men – continue to become involved in dealing and crime at high rates (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Gwadz et al., 2009; Werb, 2008).

Previous research has elucidated how involvement in dealing and crime is shaped by the imperatives of addiction and day to day survival in the context of extreme urban poverty (Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996; Cross, Johnson, Davis, & Liberty, 2001; DeBeck et al., 2007; Small et al., 2013; Werb, 2008). However, a growing body of research has cautioned against an overly deterministic understanding of the relationship between drug use, dealing, and crime. Involvement in dealing and crime is often shaped by much more expansive desires beyond mere survival, including the "search for respect" in the postindustrial wastelands of the American inner city (Bourgois, 1996), and the "renegade dreams" that transform various kinds of physical, social, and economic injury into aspirations that exceed the "isolated," inner city ghetto (Ralph, 2014). These activities can be understood as a way into "pleasure, status and meaning" in the context of entrenched social, spatial, and economic marginalization, and

\* Corresponding author at: British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, 608-1081 Burrard Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6Z 1Y6, Canada. Fax: +1 604 806 9044. E-mail address: [dfast@cfenet.ubc.ca](mailto:dfast@cfenet.ubc.ca) (D. Fast).

chronic boredom (Ferrell, 2004; Hayward, 2007; Katz, 1988; Stevens, 2011, p. 51). They are often bound up with an elaborate “moral economy” of the streets, in which everyday sociability is facilitated through the exchange of goods, services, money, and subcontract illicit employment (in the form of dealing, as well as the violent “enforcement” of drug debts and turf, for example; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Karandinos et al., 2014; Wakeman, 2016).

This paper builds on this body of research to examine the material, moral, and affective worlds of dealing and crime among young men who were significantly entrenched in an inner city drug scene in Vancouver, Canada. Drawing on over eight years of qualitative and ethnographic research, we trace youth’s involvement in dealing and crime across time, including their initiation into these activities, transitions in the intensity of their involvement, and periods of time when they attempted to cease their involvement altogether. Tracing these trajectories or “careers” (Carvalho & Soares, 2016; Densley & Stevens, 2014) allows us to situate dealing and crime on the streets of Vancouver in relation to the wider landscapes of marginalization and desire experienced by these youth, both across time, and across place. Young men’s involvement in dealing and crime cannot be understood independently of the material contexts that powerfully constrained their life chances. Consistent with previous work (Pitts, 2008), money and the things it bought – including drugs – were often a large part of what motivated youth to become involved in criminal activity. Also consistent with previous work (Bourgois, 1996; Wakeman, 2016), the world of dealing and crime did offer youth an alternative forum for dignity and individuation in the margins. However, we argue that in our setting these endeavors were not solely about economic survival, or even the accrual of highly meaningful forms of “street capital” in the margins (Harding, 2014; Sandberg, 2008; Sandberg & Pederson, 2009)—certainly not at the lowest levels, where status and wealth were fleeting at best. Rather, in order to understand young men’s initiation into and sustained involvement in these “risky” activities, we also need to examine how dealing and crime opened up new value systems, moral logics, and affects in relation to the tremendous risks, potential rewards, and crushing boredom of life in the margins.

A growing number of criminologists have found Bourdieu’s conceptualizations of capital, habitus, field, and practice useful for understanding the interplay of structure and agency in the worlds of street level drug dealers and gang members (Fraser, 2013; Harding, 2014; Moyle & Coomber, 2016; Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012; Shammas & Sandberg, 2015). However, in our setting we find it more useful to view dealing and crime among street entrenched young men as “regimes of living” (Collier & Lakoff, 2005) that have emerged out of shared experiences of social suffering across time and place—but also, importantly, a shared desire for things to be otherwise (Biehl & Locke, 2010). Following Collier and Lakoff (2005), we define regimes of living as tentative and situated configurations of practices and practical knowledges, relationships and habits of relating, as well as technologies of administration (e.g., meager monthly welfare payments), political elements (e.g., the war on drugs), and imaginaries (e.g., of capitalist consumption), which are brought into alignment in situations where the question of *how* to live is at stake. These configurations engender particular value systems, moral logics, affects, and subjectivities—such as the ambitious “hustler” who uses the lucrative price point of illicit drugs on the streets in order to finally “get ahead” in life, the loyal “worker” who does what he is told by his gang member “employer” and keeps his mouth shut (even if it means going to jail), and the “heroic gangster” who punishes the guilty and protects the innocent. The biographical and historical sediments that constitute the habitus are bound up in the configurations of practices, practical knowledges, and habits of

relating that are brought into alignment to produce particular regimes of living. However, regimes of living also incorporate rapidly circulating and shifting technologies of administration, political elements, and global imaginaries, resulting in new common sense understandings of the world that may diverge significantly from past experience. The young men in this study enacted multiple regimes of living simultaneously, which were continually reworked, reshaped, and improvised in response to the shifting exigencies of particular situations. Their subjectivities were similarly shifting and multiple—in different moments, young men forcefully positioned themselves as “hustlers,” “drug dealers,” and “gangsters,” but also as “students,” “tradespeople,” “boy-friends,” “fathers,” and “sons” (to list only a few of the possibilities).

## Methods

This paper draws on over 150 audio recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews with 75 young men and women from 2008 to 2016, and ethnographic fieldwork with a group of approximately 25 of those youth over the same time period, all conducted by the first author (DF). Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of study participants and phasing of interviews and fieldwork across the study period.

While both young men and women regularly engaged in dealing and crime on the streets of Vancouver, and were immersed in many of the same value systems, moral logics, and affects we describe below, it was also clear that gender intersects in complex and important ways with experiences and understandings of dealing and crime across time and place. As such, we felt the need to limit the scope of our paper to a detailed consideration of young men’s involvement in these activities, with work focused on young women to follow.

## The youth

Participants were recruited from the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS), an ongoing prospective cohort of street involved youth in Vancouver that has been described in detail elsewhere (see Wood, Stoltz, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006). While recruited participants for the most part lived separate lives from each other, they were also part of an urban population for whom everyday living has been rendered problematic in similar ways. On the streets of Vancouver, their social suffering (Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997) took the form of addictions to crack cocaine, heroin, and crystal methamphetamine, as well as chronic joblessness and homelessness. It was engendered by the everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) of volatile drug deals and romantic relationships, and the structural violence (Farmer, 1997) of historical and institutional forces ranging from the ongoing effects of colonialism in Canada (approximately one third of the youth in this study were of Indigenous ancestry), to growing socioeconomic inequity and vastly inadequate monthly social assistance payments in the Province of British Columbia. Of the 44 young men interviewed as part of this study, the vast majority grew up in low income, materially disadvantaged households, and over half had experienced violence in the form of physical assaults early in life. The structural and everyday violence they experienced as children could also take the form of perpetual uncertainty and dislocation—roughly half had a history of government care in group and foster homes. Only a handful had graduated from high school or later completed their General Education Diploma (GED)—sometimes while in juvenile detention.

Social suffering across time and place also took the form of chronic boredom. It might have seemed that these youth led lives so troubled that there was little room for boredom. In fact, boredom was omnipresent both in the places of youth’s childhoods and on the streets of Vancouver. While previous work on boredom

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5120744>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5120744>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)