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Safety and danger in downtown Vancouver: Understandings of place among young people entrenched in an urban drug scene

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ABSTRACT

We undertook this qualitative study to examine young people's understandings of the physical and social landscape of the downtown drug scene in Vancouver, Canada. In-depth interviews were conducted with 38 young people ranging from 16 to 26 years of age. Using the concept of *symbolic violence*, we describe how one downtown neighborhood in particular powerfully symbolizes 'risk' among local youth, and how the idea of this neighborhood (and what happens when young people go there) informs experiences of marginalization in society's hierarchies. We also discuss the complex role played by social networks in transcending the geographical and conceptual boundaries between distinct downtown drug-using neighborhoods. Finally, we emphasize that young people's *spatial tactics* within this downtown landscape – the everyday movements they employ in order to maximize their safety – must be understood in the context of everyday violence and profound social suffering.

Introduction

Popular imaginings of young, homeless drug users are often informed by their use of public space. Whether because they are viewed as children in need of protection or criminals bent on destruction, drug-using, street-dwelling young people are overwhelmingly considered 'out-of-place' in the public spaces of urban centers (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 1998; Hecht, 1998; Mitchell, 2003). Accordingly, public health and policy efforts to address the 'street youth problem' have consistently aimed to exclude, relocate or forcibly remove 'deviant' youth from public space (Caldeira, 2000; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2008; Connell, 2003; Moore, 2004b). These strategies largely ignore the contextual factors – such as neighborhood deprivation and disadvantage, and ongoing experiences of social and economic suffering among youth (Rhodes et al., 2005) – that operate to rapidly isolate and push them towards harmful drug use practices and homelessness, until it becomes difficult or impossible for them to avoid 'risking risk' (Mayock, 2005; Lovell, 2002; Mitchell, 2003).

However, there is a growing body of work that focuses on how young people understand and experience place in their everyday lives (Gigengack, 2000; Beazley, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2007), where *place* is defined as the intersection between social and physical *spaces* (Massey, 1994). This research has illustrated that rather than being somehow 'placeless,' young people living on the margins of social and physical spaces may possess a heightened understanding of and attachment to the landscapes they inhabit. Survival on the streets often means navigating the 'geographies of power' (Caldeira, 2000) that limit these young people's uses of public space, and enacting 'geographies of resistance' (Beazley, 2002) in response to institutionalized spatial marginalization. A focus on how young people experience, understand and navigate urban space – how they may be simultaneously in-place as well as out-of-place on the streets of urban centers (Moyer, 2004; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 1998) – has highlighted the problematic institutions and structures that contribute to their continued marginalization, as well as the strategies or spatial *tactics* (De Certeau, 1984) that they employ in order to appropriate public space according to their own needs, priorities and desires (Moyer, 2004; Eugene, 1999). For example, work with street-entrenched youth in Indonesia has illustrated how state ideological discourse about family values and gender roles has been used to justify 'clean up' efforts aimed at forcibly removing young people – and particularly young women – from the streets of Yogyakarta (Beazley, 2002). However, this research also illustrates the ways in which these young women have succeeded in rejecting conventional gender roles through

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spatial tactics (e.g., occupying a city park) aimed at carving out relatively safe, 'girl-only' geographical niches in the city center. Similarly, work from Tanzania has discussed the disjuncture between a state-sponsored project of modernization and the presence of hundreds of young men living and working on the streets of Dar es Salaam, which results in the frequent arrest of these informal street-based entrepreneurs and the destruction of their make-shift street stalls. At the same time, this research has shown how young people's appropriation of 'nowhere places' (such as street corners, abandoned lots or stretches of roadside) in the pursuit of financial gain in fact constitutes a spatial tactic aimed at securing a place in the *very same* modernizing project endorsed by the state (Moyer, 2004).

In downtown Vancouver, Canada, a growing number of street-entrenched and drug-using youth have emerged in a residential and business center of the city known as the Downtown South. While it is difficult to enumerate this highly transient population (The McCreary Centre Society, 2007), a local youth shelter reports that between 500 and 1000 youth are without housing each night in the Greater Vancouver area (Covenant House Vancouver, 2009). In addition to lacking shelter, intensive drug use – including the use of crystal methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine and crack – and alarming rates of HIV and hepatitis C infection have also been documented in this population (Lloyd-Smith et al., 2008; Werb et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2005). Although various youth services are now situated in the Downtown South (e.g., clinics and drop-in centers), decision makers and advocacy groups continue to struggle to address the 'street youth problem' in this setting (The McCreary Centre Society, 2002). To date, enforcement, arrest and removal of youth from public spaces have been the primary strategies aimed at this population, with a particular focus on 'cracking down on' the local drug scene.

Drug scenes have been described as inner-city areas characterized by high concentrations of drug users and drug dealing within a specific geographical area (Curtis and Wendel, 2000; Hough and Natarajan, 2000). These places vary considerably according to a number of factors, including the types of drugs available, who controls the sale of illicit substances, the specific locales in which drugs are sold and used, as well as the history of particular drug-use settings (Bourgois, 1996; Maher, 1997). Beyond drug procurement and dealing activities, everyday practices associated with securing basic necessities (e.g., meals, clean clothes, showers) as well as wider patterns of income generation activities are also embedded in the socio-spatial networks of these locales (Bourgois, 1996; Maher, 1997). As such, drug scenes powerfully shape drug use practices, the nature of social interactions between young people and range of social actors (including peers, older drug users, informal 'street' employers, police and service providers), as well as the formation of identity constructed and performed through spatial practices (De Certeau, 1984; Dovey et al., 2001; Butler, 1990; Robinson, 2000). Equally, these places are *shaped by* the practices and human interactions that take place within them.

In downtown Vancouver, the local drug scene (referred to by many youth as simply 'down here') is primarily comprised of two distinct neighborhoods: the Downtown South[1] and the Downtown Eastside (Map 1). Although these areas are geographically adjacent (within 20–30 min walking distance of each other), they are generally conceptualized as two distinct urban neighborhoods. Among the general public, the boundary that exists between them is largely one of differential affluence; while the Downtown Eastside is widely recognized as Canada's poorest and most crime-ridden urban postal code (Strathdee et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2003), the Downtown South is a residential and entertainment district characterized by both high- and (limited) low-income housing and numerous thriving businesses. The respective drug-using populations within these neighborhoods are also distinct (although overlap exists); while the Downtown South is characterized by high rates of crystal methamphetamine sales and use primarily among youth (Bungay et al., 2006), the Downtown Eastside is characterized by a long-standing and well-established trade in crack cocaine, cocaine and heroin (Wood and Kerr, 2006). Furthermore, although the Downtown Eastside can accurately be characterized as a more 'open' drug scene in comparison to that of the Downtown South, in reality, a wide range of illicit substances are easily available on the streets of both locales. Both neighborhoods are characterized by thriving 'shadow economies' largely propelled by sex work activities, drug dealing and the exchange of stolen goods. The Downtown Eastside in particular has been subjected to intensive enforcement initiatives in recent years (Small et al., 2006), although police activities are also ongoing in the Downtown South (The McCreary Centre Society, 2002).

We undertook the present study in order to explore how youth who are currently 'street-entrenched' understand the physical and social landscape of the downtown drug scene in Vancouver's urban core. Given the geographical proximity of the Downtown South – a frequent destination for young people 'at-risk' – to the Downtown Eastside, there is a need to understand how young people experience and navigate these locales. Indeed, our observations indicate that many youth move frequently between the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods, whether on foot or via public bus (which they can often ride for free depending on the disposition of the driver). To date, however, the majority of research looking at the relationship between drug scene involvement and 'risk' among young people has largely focused on geographically confined inner-city areas characterized by ubiquitous 'open' drug use and crime – such as Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighborhood (Bourgois et al., 2004; Bourgois, 1996; Small et al., 2005a,b, 2006; Maher, 1997). The intersection between experiences of place and experiences of risk and harm among young people existing *outside of* or *transcending* the boundaries of these inner-city communities remains less well understood. Furthermore, the ways in which young people's 'risk trajectories' – the sequences of transitions experienced by young people in relation to drug use and risk over time (Hser et al., 2007; Elder, 1985) – are shaped by *geographical* transitions (whether across countries, regions or adjacent drug-using neighborhoods) have yet to be explored in-depth. Finally, a focus on the meanings attached to places – and how these meanings inform spatial practices – has important implications for the development of appropriate interventions for youth who experience significant vulnerability while trying to make their homes in Vancouver's urban core.

Methods

In order to explore how young people conceptualized the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods (as well as the relationship between them), we drew upon data from 38 in-depth individual interviews conducted from May to October 2008, as well as ongoing ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., observations and informal conversations with youth) conducted in both the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside.

[1] In referring to the Downtown South area, youth occasionally include Vancouver's West End neighborhood, which contains some youth services and numerous outdoor 'hang outs' and sleeping spots for homeless young people. For this reason, we have included the West End in our map of the downtown Vancouver drug scene, while demonstrating that this area is technically separate from the Downtown South.