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Did Somebody Say Community? Young People's Critiques of Conventional Community Narratives in the Context of a Local Drug Scene

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Abstract

The language of community is ubiquitous in academic, public health, and policy discourse about drug using populations. Yet, it has been argued that in some settings, the parameters of “the drug user community” are far from self-evident. We undertook this ethnographic investigation to explore experiences and understandings of a “drug user community” (sometimes referred to more specifically as a “street youth community”) among young people entrenched in Vancouver’s inner city drug scene. Our findings revealed that in this context, conventional notions of community—that is, a social network characterized by commonality, mutual responsibility, solidarity, and/or stability—resonated with some youth. However, most questioned the value of membership within this community, in which what they had in common with other youth were ongoing experiences of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion. Many felt membership in the drug user community precluded their ability to be responsible and productive citizens within the wider community of “mainstream society.” Experiences of resource deprivation and everyday violence on the streets led many participants to emphasize the limited possibilities for community among their peers. We argue that it is important to critically examine heretofore essentializing assumptions about the nature of inner city drug user or street youth communities in order to better understand young people’s needs and desires in these settings.

Keywords

drug scene; drug use; street youth; community; violence

Introduction

We’re all [pause] drug users. I don’t think it has anything to do with community.
It’s every man for himself. But my friends are my friends. I’d do anything for them.

— Daniel, age 24

Community is a notoriously ambiguous concept. It is used with diverse referents, from shared aspects of lifestyle to ethnic groupings to socioeconomic status within broader social

structures. Communities can be imagined; they can be based on a shared idea of people's affinity to one another (Anderson 1983). They can also be based on everyday interaction in particular social and physical spaces, and a shared connection to place (Gigengack 2000). Communities can be temporary. At one moment, the community label may be politically expedient; at another, it may become counterproductive in the ways that it obscures diversity. People can claim membership in many communities simultaneously; yet, our membership in some communities necessarily precludes membership in others. Communities are always to an extent systems of inclusion and exclusion. However, even when community is delineated largely by physical geography, the boundaries of these communities are never static because social, political, and economic processes continually alter the landscapes in which local worlds are enclosed (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007). The boundaries that separate one community from another are often blurred, shifting, and overlapping, as the meanings bound up in community are negotiated and redefined by social actors with multiple social positions and roles (Hannerz 1992). Community is a lived category that is constantly changing in the context of everyday experience.

Social science and public health discourse is frequently informed by what have been referred to as “assumed communities” (Singer 2006)—social groupings characterized by shared social interaction, interests, experience, and perspective among constituent members. The “drug user community” exemplifies an assumed community. A particular politics of public health (Nettleton and Bunton 1995) has increasingly used the language of community to communicate that people who use drugs in inner city settings are capable of self-determination, self-regulation, and health promotion within their own communities (Friedman, de Jong, and Wodak 1993; Moore and Fraser 2006; Rhodes and Hartnoll 1996). Community-based, peer-driven, and social network approaches to the management and minimization of risk are increasingly viewed as *de rigeur* for reducing harm among drug users (Degenhardt et al. 2010; Des Jarlais and Semaan 2008; Goldberg-Freeman et al. 2007; Latkin et al. 2009; Needle et al. 2005). Moreover, the language of community is built into research focused on drug use from the earliest stages; the recruitment, cooperation, and collaboration of “community partners”—organizations that can represent and protect the collective interests of the wider group—are frequent requirements of funding and ethics applications (Goldberg-Freeman et al. 2007; Henman et al. 1998). The “street youth community” also exemplifies an assumed community. Services aimed at street youth use the language of community to denote not only the shared social interaction, interests, experiences, and perspectives of the young people they serve, but also the potential for meaningful change in these young people's lives through community engagement and initiative (Karabanow 2004). Researchers frequently collaborate with these community-based services to recruit a representative study sample of street youth in a particular urban setting (Karabanow 2006; Roy 2003; Wood et al. 2006).

In spite of a firm commitment to the language of community in public health, policy, and academic discussions about drug users and street youth, it has been pointed out that the parameters of these communities, and the extent to which they are characterized by shared social interaction, interests, experience, and perspectives, is far from self-evident in many settings (Beazley 2003; Gigengack 2000; Hengst 1997; Singer 2006). As early as the 1950s (Becker 1953), sociocultural approaches to the study of drug use have explored the existence of shared meanings and social practices—which were later often referred to as “drug user subcultures”—among groups of people who use drugs in inner city settings. While we recognize that the two terms are not synonymous, the problems inherent in theorizing a coherent and monolithic drug user subculture are similar to those of conceptualizing a stable drug user community. Both may fail to recognize the fluidity and fragmentation of cultural practices, social relationships, and identities (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Hannerz 1992; Waterson 1993; Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003). As anthropological understandings have

dislodged themselves from assumptions about geographically-bounded “local communities,” we have become increasingly interested in the complexities, inconsistencies, and contradictions involved in the negotiation of lived experience in and across particular times and places (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). We now recognize that even occupying a particular physical geography is a dynamic experience in which meanings tied to place are continually remade through the social interactions that take place within (and increasingly beyond) these locations (Gordillo 2004; Massey 1994).

We do not dispute the idea that the lives of people who use drugs together, or in close proximity to each other, are organized around shared, socially constructed meanings, symbols and cultural mores, and a shared connection to place (Fast et al. 2009b). Nor are we discounting the idea that any meaningful change in patterns of harm among inner city drug using populations should be the result of locally informed and produced initiative, as opposed to top-down approaches that are largely incongruent with local realities. We do not deny the political power of employing the language of community in struggles over recognition. However, we follow others in recognizing that the notion of a single drug user community may be a politicized fiction (Beyrer et al. 2010), which tends to ignore the fact that even relatively coherent political movements are constituted by numerous and contradictory lived realities that are not easily grouped together in any simple or stable way (Moore 2004; Read 1980; Thornton 1996). While this complexity has been well explored in the international literature on “street children” and “street youth” (Beazley 2002, 2003; Gigengack 1999, 2000; Hengst 1997), there has been less consideration of these dynamics in North American settings (with some notable exceptions; e.g., Singer 2006). We undertook the current study to explore experiences and understandings of a drug user and street youth community among a group of young people who use drugs “on the streets” of downtown Vancouver—a phrase that in our setting refers to numerous indoor and outdoor locations and the local drug scene more generally. We examine the implications these meanings might have for research practice, as well as for the development of interventions (e.g., policy, programs, and services) aimed at youth in our setting. However, our study does not specifically seek to evaluate existing programs and interventions based on young people’s conceptions of community.

Setting

The present study is part of a larger program of ethnographic research that explores intersections between place and “risk” among young people entrenched in Vancouver’s inner city drug scene (Fast et al. 2009a; Fast et al. 2009b; Fast et al. 2010; Krüsi et al. 2010; Small et al. 2009). Drug scenes are historical, cultural, social, temporal, and spatial zones in which diverse people interact and continually negotiate and renegotiate the meanings of their actions (Fast et al. 2009a; Fast et al. 2010); they are characterized by experiences of fluidity and fragmentation, as well as permanence and immovability (Fast et al. 2009b; Moore 2004). Beyond drug procurement and dealing activities, elaborate social spatial networks, practices associated with the day-to-day realities of securing basic necessities, and wider patterns of income generation activities are also embedded in these locales. As such, these places powerfully shape drug use practices, the nature of social interactions, as well as the formation of identity constructed and performed through spatial practices (Butler 1990; De Certeau 1984; Dovey, Fitzgerald, and Choi 2001; Robinson 2000). Equally, these places are shaped by the practices and human interactions that take place within them.

In downtown Vancouver, the drug scene includes most notably the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods (often referred to as simply “down here” by local youth). Although these neighborhoods are geographically adjacent, they are consistently differentiated according to their history and other aspects of place. Among the general

public, the boundary that exists between them is largely aesthetic. While the Downtown Eastside is widely conceived as Vancouver's poorest and most run-down neighborhood (although it is presently undergoing rapid gentrification), the Downtown South is a residential and entertainment district characterized by both high- and (limited) low-income housing and numerous small businesses. While the Downtown South is a relatively recent destination for the urban poor, including a large number of people who use drugs, the Downtown Eastside has long been home to Vancouver's poorest residents and a drug market that has been in operation for decades. The Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods are also differentiated by substance use and the degree to which that substance use is visible in public space, although much overlap exists, and it should also be noted that both neighborhoods are inhabited by a large number of people who do not use drugs. The Downtown Eastside is identified with a highly visible or "open" trade in crack cocaine, cocaine, and heroin bought and sold primarily by older individuals (Wood and Kerr 2006), while the Downtown South is identified with high rates of crystal methamphetamine sales and use primarily among youth, which occurs mostly in semi-public and private locales (Wood et al. 2006). In addition to the intensive use of crystal methamphetamine (as well as heroin, cocaine, and crack), alarming rates of homelessness and hepatitis C infection have also been documented among this youth population (Lloyd-Smith et al. 2008; Marshall et al. 2009a; Marshall et al. 2009b; Werb et al. 2008; Wood et al. 2008). Both neighborhoods are characterized by shadow economies propelled by sex work activities, drug dealing, and the exchange of stolen goods—activities that require youth to move in and out of the downtown core and implicate various other areas in Greater Vancouver. 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 longevity of patterns of residence in the Downtown Eastside, and of various grass-roots services operating there, mean that this neighborhood is often attributed a strong sense of community, both by residents of the neighborhood and elements of the general public (Roe 2010). Although various youth services are now situated in the Downtown South (e.g., clinics and drop-in centers), the comparative transience of this young drug using population, and the more "closed" nature of the Downtown South drug scene, mean that the parameters of this drug user or street youth community are much less clear. Nevertheless, community-based interventions are among those being implemented in the neighborhood, most notably peer outreach to distribute sterile drug use paraphernalia and harm reduction information, provide "on-the-go" needle exchange, and pick up discarded syringes from the streets and alleyways of high traffic drug use areas.

Methods

This study was informed by over 100 in-depth interviews as well as ongoing ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author since 2008, initially concentrating on Vancouver's Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods and later extending to include other locales in the Greater Vancouver area. Youth were recruited from the existing At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS) cohort, a prospective cohort of drug using and street involved youth that has been described in detail elsewhere (Wood et al. 2006). ARYS cohort members are between the ages of 14 and 26 years and self-report use of illicit drugs other than or in addition to marijuana in the past 30 days at the time of enrollment.

Data collection occurred in three waves. A first wave of in-depth interviews occurred in 2008. Thirty-nine participants (18 men, 19 women, and 2 transgender individuals) were recruited with the help of a youth research assistant, who was himself in the process of exiting the local scene. Many of the young people he recruited had, like himself, "grown up

on the streets,” with parents who were involved in drug use and crime. Others had transitioned from the inner city streets of other Canadian urban centers to the streets of downtown Vancouver (Fast et al. 2009a). Approximately half of participants came from other towns and cities in British Columbia or from the outlying cities that comprise Greater Vancouver. Initially, these youth moved between home and the streets via Vancouver’s public transit system; as they become entrenched in drug use, homelessness, and poverty, they increasingly relied on the services located in downtown Vancouver for food and shelter. Participants ranged from 16 to 26 years of age, with an average age of 22. For all three waves of data collection, approximately 70 percent of youth identified as Caucasian, and approximately 30 percent identified as being of aboriginal ancestry. Four participants identified as African Canadian.

From July 2009 to April 2010, a second wave of in-depth interviews was conducted. Twenty-eight young people were interviewed, 20 men and 8 women. Their ages ranged from 14 to 25, with an average age of 21. Participants were recruited at our front line office in the Downtown South. Youth enrolled in the ARYS cohort study frequent this office twice a year to complete an interviewer-administered questionnaire and provide a blood sample; many also drop in regularly to use the phone, drink coffee, and pick up donated clothing, toiletries, and snacks. All interviews during the first two waves of data collection occurred in this office. Recruitment was facilitated by staff members who administer the questionnaire; they would sometimes recommend that we approach a particular youth for participation in our study based on their ongoing relationship with that young person and their knowledge of our research interests. Other times, Fast approached youth based on relationships she had established with them previously while spending time at the office and in the surrounding area. In 2010, follow-up interviews were conducted with 12 of these young people, 8 men and 4 women. Whether a follow-up interview occurred was largely determined by young people’s interest in the project, their ongoing relationship with the researcher, and their ability to come in for a scheduled interview.

Although ethnographic research had been ongoing since 2008, in 2011 Fast began to engage in more intensive fieldwork with a core group of 25 youth, 11 of whom had first been interviewed in 2008 and 6 of whom had been interviewed in 2009. The remaining 8 participants were either close friends of, or romantically involved with, these 17 participants already well-known to the researcher. Participants now ranged from 20 to 30 years of age, with an average age of 26. During 2011 and the first half of 2012, Fast saw each of these young people on at least a bi-weekly basis; recorded interviews occurred primarily in the places where young people were living, socializing, and working.

The 72 young people who took part in this study were a diverse group who for the most part lived separate lives from one another (Miller 2008). They frequented many of the same service locations and had likely used drugs together in the parks and alleyways of downtown Vancouver at one time or another; yet, only a small number were networked in a more enduring sense, usually in the form of a romantic or crime-related partnership. Nevertheless, participants did share a number of things in common. Almost all grew up in low-income, materially disadvantaged households; most had experienced violence, abuse, or neglect at home, and many had a history of institutionalized care. A large number (over two-thirds of male participants) also had a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system, and many had served time in a provincial prison. All but a handful reported being homeless during the course of the study (meaning that they were sleeping outside, “couch surfing” at acquaintances’ places, and/or staying at shelters—most often a combination thereof). Those who were not homeless most often lived in single-room occupancy hotels or low-income housing in downtown Vancouver. By 2012, four participants lived in rented apartments or basement suites in parts of Greater Vancouver.

At the time of interview(s), all but 10 youth were currently engaged in drug use practices that they defined as “out of- control”; that is, drug use which was resulting in physical, psychological, and emotional damage, whether directly as a result of the chemical properties of a particular substance or indirectly as a result of the violence and instability that can accompany addiction in the context of social, spatial, and economic marginalization. Over three-quarters of those participants indicated that they had been involved in this kind of drug use for at least three years. A small number (less than one-quarter) of youth indicated that they were “getting clean” at the time of interview(s) (i.e., they had not used drugs intensively or at all for a period of time they deemed significant). In 2012, only three participants defined themselves as “clean” and “completely off of drugs.”

Over three-quarters of participants were involved in illicit income generation activities, including street-level drug dealing, sex work, theft, and the sale of stolen goods to turn a modest profit. A small number engaged in recycling activities (“binning,”) panhandling, and street performing. Over the study period, a few male youth found employment as construction workers, movers, and cleaners, and a few young women worked as babysitters. For about one-third of youth, income was supplemented by participation in a youth job service that provides hourly work (e.g., street garbage removal, graffiti removal) for same-day pay. Participants also accrued additional income from participation in research studies aimed at street youth and drug users. Three-quarters received monthly welfare payments, although even among those who received “disability assistance,” it was rarely enough to live on.

During interviews, we asked youth for their perspectives on the general concept of community, as well as what it meant to talk specifically about a drug user or street youth community in downtown Vancouver. We also encouraged youth to elaborate on the nature of various social relationships—including romantic relationships, “business” partnerships (e.g., for the purpose of drug dealing or exchanging stolen goods), as well as interactions with friends, peers, and acquaintances of varying ages. Finally, we asked them to reflect on the idea of shared knowledge and skills (described as “street smarts”) among youth on the streets.

Data collection and analyses occurred concurrently as fieldwork progressed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy; ATLAS.TI software was used to manage the coded data. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were initially analyzed according to a coding framework that captured broad emergent themes (e.g., community and violence, community and protection) and analytic categories (e.g., symbolic violence, gender dynamics). Subsequent fieldwork and in-depth interviews were used to rework and refine the coding framework in an iterative process. Evolving interpretations of the data were discussed with youth, both informally in the field with those who had already been interviewed and more formally in subsequent interviews. In addition, the research team discussed the content of interviews and fieldnotes throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

The study was undertaken with ethical approval granted by the Providence Healthcare/ University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board. All names appearing below are pseudonyms. All informants provided their informed, written consent and received a \$20 honorarium for their interview participation. The debate surrounding the payment of research participants, in particular those who use illicit drugs, is considerable (Broadhead 2008; Buchanan et al. 2002; Head 2009; Scott 2008). Given that researchers are compensated with salaries and other external awards, our position is that expecting informants to participate in interviews and other research activities on an uncompensated basis, particularly when they are living in conditions of extreme poverty, is problematic.

Participating in an interview or fieldwork session means that young people must take time away from other income generating activities needed to meet their everyday needs. We need to keep asking important questions about the meaning of voluntary participation and the safety of those leaving the research office to go and “score” within minutes of concluding an interview or fieldwork session (Buchanan et al. 2002); however, we believe that compensating young people for their time was essential to the ethical integrity of this research, and in defining an unambiguous, working relationship between researcher and research subjects over the four year study period.

The Contradictions of Community: I Want to Rejoin Society Again

Interviews revealed a number of contradictory perspectives on the idea of community in the context of drug scene involvement—often within the course of a single interview. Consistent with previous research that highlights the complex negotiation of individual and collective identities in relation to shifting understandings and experiences of “the streets” (Beazley 2003; Gigengack 1999; Lucchini 1996), young people’s narratives indicated that they deploy the idea of community in different ways at different times and to achieve different ends.

Consistent with mainstream understandings, a majority of participants indicated that the drug user or street youth community implied commonality—a sharing of perspective, experience, and knowledge among those living, working, and using drugs on the streets. For a minority of participants, shared experiences of social suffering (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997) provided the basis for a sense of community responsibility toward one another. For example, participants described a widely accepted moral code that prohibited them from initiating younger, newcomer youth (referred to as “house punks” and “twinkies”) into injecting (e.g., “Everyone knows that that’s not done down here and that people like me who know what that does to your life will beat you up for that”) Young people told these stories about a collective responsibility to protect at the same time as admitting that they had themselves been initiated into injecting by someone older and more experienced.

Youth also described with pride a sense of community responsibility that led them to take the initiative in distributing clean needles, conducting needle sweeps, as well as putting up makeshift boxes for dirty needle disposal in high volume drug use areas. These youth were usually closely connected with youth drop-in services and service staff and aspired to one day become outreach workers and addiction counselors once they “got clean” and “got their lives together.” As Alice, age 18, (personal communication) elaborated in 2008:

Yeah you could say I’m a part of a community...in that every outreach worker, they don’t mind handing me either 50 syringes and/or a clean [needle disposal] box for a dirties box. Whenever I ask, even when their limit was 10 to 15 syringes for anybody, they still gave me 50 to 100, to make sure I hand them out, right? I put a big yellow dirties box on the other side of the Burrard bridge [the main bridge connecting Westside Vancouver to the Downtown South]. I tacked it up. People use it. It’s actually the only one on that side of the bridge that’s out there like that. It’s mostly normal people over there, you know, so it’s good for everyone.

In our setting, youth who inject drugs are arguably the most marginalized and stigmatized young drug users—both by the general public and their non-injecting peers. Youth were unanimous in declaring that injection drug use was “the worst kind of drug use out there.” Injecting youths’ heightened emphasis on a sense of responsibility, both in reference to the drug user community as well as the general public, can be read as an example of how the politics of public health—the notion of a responsible drug-using subject who is capable of self-determination, self-regulation, and health promotion—can at times be appropriated by

young people to counter pervasive, stigmatizing discourses (e.g., the “junkie” as motivated by compulsive desires and pure self-interest) (Moore 2008; Moore and Fraser 2006). In such moments, these politics can be experienced as empowering. However, this sense of responsibility does not always translate into action; illusions of moral order and boundary management give way to practical considerations (Gigengack 1999), as, for example, when young people initiate newcomers into injecting in order to “score a hit” for themselves. In these instances, these politics can actually reinforce experiences of symbolic violence when young people fail to live up to the standards of the responsible community member—a failure that may be shaped in large part by powerful social structural constraints, but is experienced as a personal deficiency or as “just the way things are” for particular “kinds” of people in particular “kinds” of places (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007; Fast et al. 2009b). Nevertheless, a small number of drug using youth consistently asserted their autonomy or capacity for autonomy in the context of the in-depth interview; they wanted to be (or at least be seen as) capable of responsible citizenship, within both the drug user community and society as a whole. As Alice stated proudly, “I know what it’s like to be civil and a part of society, but I also know what it’s like and what it means to be part of the street team.”

For the majority of youth, the commonality implied by a drug user or street youth community was constructed as negative. Whether they believed it existed or not, youth consistently questioned the value of membership in a community where the dominant shared experiences were those of chronic poverty and marginalization (Shoveller et al. 2007), and what they had in common was the “street-smarts” necessary for survival:

Being street smart means staying away from other street people that are more scrubbed out [appear unkempt], that never shower, that do a lot of drinking.... It’s knowing a spot where to sleep to make sure no one robs you while you’re sleeping or beats you up. Yeah, I’m street smart, but I don’t want to be street smart anymore, and I don’t want to be like those people who are all like, ‘Yeah, I’m street smart, I’m part of the community.’ It’s bullshit. Right now I have to be. But I want to get a place, and I want to get a job. Normal life kinda thing.

(Grady, age 17, personal communication)

Like Grady, a large number of young people maintained a strong conceptual distinction between the street youth community and “society” (which they sometimes referred to as “the wider community,” or simply “the community.”) Many understood their membership in the latter as precluding membership in the former; yet, “rejoining society” and having a “normal life” were things that most participants dearly wanted, particularly as they aged out of the youth-focused services in the Downtown South and felt themselves being “pushed” towards the Downtown Eastside where the majority of adult-focused services are located (Lucchini 1996; Visano 1990). Ending up in the Downtown Eastside was consistently equated with “giving up hope” on ever becoming a “productive member of society” among study participants (Fast et al. 2009b; Krüsi et al. 2010). During the interview, most youth created distance between themselves and the idea of stable membership in a drug user or street youth community (e.g., “I’m not really a ‘street youth’; I’m getting out of downtown soon.”) This distancing was often achieved by emphasizing the imminent acquisition of “a place” and “a job” and, interestingly, negating one’s ongoing role in the research study—a study that implies a relatively stable grouping or community of at-risk, drug using youth (e.g., “Yeah, I came in for this interview today, but tomorrow I’m getting a place, and next week my cousin is hooking me up with a job, so I don’t think you’ll be seeing me around here anymore....”) While some youth, like Alice, seemed to be able to reconcile their membership in the drug user community with productive and responsible citizenship within

mainstream society, others seemed to feel that membership in the drug user or street youth community precluded this kind of citizenship—a situation many found distressing:

I guess that every homeless person is part of the community, right? But I don't want to be in that community forever. [pauses, sighs] I want to rejoin society again. And contribute something, you know?

(Tyson, age 17, personal communication)

We're All Against the Cops

For a majority of youth, community implied solidarity; in particular, they found the language of community useful when reflecting on the pervasiveness of arrest and police violence in downtown Vancouver. The notion of a drug user or street youth community was constructed in opposition to law enforcement efforts that were viewed as imposing undue harassment and discrimination on the urban poor (e.g., "We're all against the cops; that's the one thing we're together on"). This collective identity was reinforced by global human rights discourse and the politics of place surrounding Vancouver's 2010 Olympic games, during which protesters demanded "housing, not games" for Vancouver's urban poor. Even youth who adamantly denied the existence of a drug user community on most occasions were willing to align themselves with this community when a particular violation of their rights was taking place or during the immediate aftermath of that violation (e.g., they would help each other to evade police or advocate for each other while arrests or harassment were taking place). This strong sense of "us" and "them" dissolved rapidly, however, once other concerns, namely the procurement of material necessities, regained primacy. Community discourse was employed at one moment to signal a collective struggle against a common enemy and to demand social justice for those occupying the margins of the urban landscape; at another moment, it became unnecessary and even unacceptable once other factors were again at play (Hengst 1997). The one exception was that no member of the community could "rat"—aid the police in tracking down and arresting other youth—at any time; the result was usually extreme acts of retributive violence and total ostracism. Thus, permanent conformity to "community values" was demanded on some level.

I Hang Out With the Big Times, and I Stay Very Close to Them

Particularly among the young women in our study, community also implied safety and stability. However, in the context of drug scene entrenchment, all of our female participants reflected on the ways in which their social networks—and in particular their networks with young men—could be simultaneously protective and the source of harm. It was widely acknowledged that romantic relationships could position young women favorably within the community in terms of access to essential resources such as income, drugs, food, shelter, prestige, and protection; however, consistent with previous work (Beazley 2002; Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004), it was equally acknowledged that these networks frequently position women unfavorably and expose them to extreme violence. Among both young men and young women, violence was considered a commonsense way to resolve problems and assert hierarchies within romantic relationships. Social networks were frequently used to "track people down" for punishment related to altercations within romantic relationships:

Yeah there is a community... I hang out with the big times [young men who are involved in low level gang activity] because I've earned that right, and I stay very close to them because so help me God, if anything everything ever happened to me, they'd have my back right away. I had to work my way up the chain. I went from going out with loser guys to going out with my boyfriend, who's at the top of the list. Who's the ultimate street fighter. I get \$300 purses, drugs whenever I want them. But you also get a lot of bad things too. Here, I'll show you [lifts her shirt]—

he burnt me with a torch. Violence, the beatings, the burnings. I've been hospitalized before because of him. I have to watch my back wherever I go. He could be watching, or one of his workers [dealers] could be watching, and they'll tell him where I am.

(Kara, age 19, personal communication)

Moreover, young women reflected that although enduring emotional attachment and caring romantic relationships were possible in their present context, these relationships were always precarious due to the realities of street life, where people can disappear for several days at a time whether as a result of incarceration, a period of drug use "binging," or the need to "lay low" and hide from someone as a result of drug debts. Alice, for example, initially spoke of a strong sense of community responsibility characterized by efforts to distribute clean syringes and post makeshift "dirties" boxes. Later in the same conversation, she reflected on the support and affection she experienced with her late son's father, as well as the instability of social networks, lack of social support, and extreme violence that detracted from positive experiences of community:

I just don't know about community actually.... Most people are only out for themselves, but I have four real friends. One is my late son's father, who has been my ultimate best friend in the whole wide world. He flailed off [disappeared suddenly while using drugs] yesterday somehow. He hasn't returned to me, and it's not like him, so I'm worried. That's the reason why I was so upset when I came in here. Our son died; he didn't meet our son while he was alive. He'd ride his bike twice a day all the way up to the Oak Street hospital [when she was in the hospital shortly before giving birth]. Sit outside, wait for me to come out for a smoke, call me down, and I'd go out and visit him. But then after I gave birth, he wouldn't come in and meet the baby because I was raped right around the same time as he and I were together [so he thought the child might not be his]. I also have a two-month-old daughter that was taken from me and I have to go to court for. And I wasn't there April 7th because I passed out and nobody woke me up, so I didn't get to court. They just left me there passed out, even though people knew what was happening that day.

(Alice, age 18, personal communication)

This is What Our Life is Like Everyday

Stories about extreme violence were the most frequent response to our questions about community:

Community? Yeah there is one [being sarcastic]. Like us—we grew up down here.... And then there's the house punks. I'm talking about the kids around here [in the Downtown South] that if they came to the Downtown Eastside, they wouldn't make it one fucking day without getting hot-shotted [being provided with a substance that will cause an overdose or toxic reaction] or killed in some way by kids like me.

(Kara, age 19, personal communication)

These stories were not always literal accounts of past events. To our knowledge, it is not the case that youth are routinely "hot-shotted" or killed by other, more experienced youth in the Downtown Eastside or the Downtown South. Such narratives were highly performative (Gigengack 1999); often, they seemed to be more reflective of young people's strong rejection of a romanticized notion of a drug user community characterized by social solidarity and camaraderie. Youth attributed this romanticized view to house punks and other inexperienced youth who, participants claimed, came downtown with the idea that

being on the streets is “cool,” and that they will become a part of a “street family” that is better than the one they are leaving. Most expressed a mixture of annoyance and anger towards these youth, who were viewed as being able to return home when they grew tired of street life—an opportunity that nearly all of the youth who participated in this study did not have:

I don't get this about people.... Like the “street youth community” [sarcastic].... Everyone's [referring to inexperienced youth] like, “Oh, it's so cool to sleep on the street,” “Oh, you've got to be street smart to live on the streets.” Anyone can easily drop a blanket on the ground and just lay down and throw another blanket over top of them and there: they're on the street. This place is a gong show [crazy, out-of-control]. There is nothing good about it. It is really, really, really, really, really, really stupid how people talk about how you got to be like “street smart” to be on the streets and stuff like that! Being street smart means not being on the streets. I don't know why, but I hate that idea.

(Aaron, age 18, personal communication)

Romanticized views of street life were highly upsetting to participants in light of their own experiences of social suffering—experiences that often persisted whether they were using drugs intensively or had been trying to “get clean” and “pull their lives together” for some time. Interestingly, a number of young people also seemed to attribute romanticized views to researchers and frontline service workers. It became clear during the interview process that in many instances, participants were angered and annoyed by what they thought the researcher thought about the street youth or drug user community (e.g., that it provides a context in which newcomers learn from other youth how to survive, and even thrive, on the streets). A significant majority of youth were critical of conventional community narratives as they applied to street life and expressed an adamantly individualist and self-reliant perspective. Again and again, youth stressed that “there is no such thing as community down here” and that “the only person you can count on is yourself.” Youths' critical perspectives and markedly dystopian responses contrasted with Fast's observations of young people socializing together, enjoying themselves on the front steps of Vancouver's art gallery or in public parks in the Downtown South. The stories they told in the context of the in-depth interview downplayed instances of camaraderie and generosity on the streets; instead, youth emphasized the role played by addiction in the context of severe material deprivation—in which the need to procure money and drugs in order to remedy “dopesickness” could often outweigh all other considerations—as well as pervasive violence or the pervasive threat of violence, in completely undermining the conditions necessary for community. Youth acknowledged that they were almost always both the victims and perpetrators of this violence. As Tao, age 24, (personal communication) explained in 2009:

There is no community.... Down here, you don't really have any close friends. There's no such thing as having a relationship in the drug world, 'cause sooner or later you're gonna be dopesick enough [i.e., sick as a result of opiate withdrawal] to screw your friend over. You know, you'll steal from them, you'll take from them, you'll grab from them. I don't care who the hell you are. I get dope sick I'm gonna take your drugs, and if you don't give them to me, I'm gonna take them harder.

While Fast witnessed many interactions and exchanges in the field indicative of friendship and social support, youth clearly wanted to tell the researcher that the everyday lived experience of drug scene entrenchment made community impossible in this setting—that this was a place in which many young people had experienced the death of their peers, and in which getting “stabbed for a toke” (inhalation on a crack pipe) and “pushed out a window” were relatively commonplace, regardless of whether this understanding reflects the statistics on neighborhood violence.

Community is impossible down here. Like it's not even an option. I've gotten beat up, I've gotten robbed, I've been taken for everything. And I've done those things, I'll admit it. This is what our life is like everyday. Dozens of your friends dying all in the same month. It's too difficult for me to have friends, to watch them die. I've had so many friends die in the last two, three years. Different reasons. Some are murders, some are suicides, some drug use. Some just because it got too cold.

(Mickey, age 25, personal communication)

Again, these statements are more performative than literal retellings of past events. It is not the case that dozens of youth in downtown Vancouver died in a single month or that kids are routinely murdered in this setting, although it does happen. It should also be noted that from approximately 1997 to 2001, dozens of women—many of whom were involved in drug use and sex work—disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and are presumed dead at the hands of serial killer Robert Pickton. The collective memory of these events continues to be a source of trauma among young people who use drugs on the street; fantastical accounts of violence are rooted in very “real” anxieties about safety connected to place.

Although youth felt strongly about the idea that “there is no such thing as community in the drug world,” many emphasized periods of time prior to having become involved in the local scene or even brief moments when they had temporarily transcended drug scene involvement, when they were capable of being “responsible” and “positive members of the community”—both in reference to the drug user community and the wider community (e.g., “One time, when I had just gotten out of detox, I gave this little boy on the bus this toy keychain I had—and that's when I really felt like a good member of the community, you know?”) Others reflected on about how things “used to be different” and that at one time people “had known the value of family and community on the streets.” Youth narratives about community at times seemed to reflect nostalgia for something most participants indicated they had never actually experienced; a “normal life” in which they could depend on and meaningfully care for others. For many participants, community signaled the trusting and stable relationships and normalcy they so greatly desired. These narratives about the possibility of community also reflect the power of public health discourse around “choice” and responsibility (Moore 2008). This discourse celebrates the drug user who is capable of responsibility and reciprocity in spite of addiction—the drug user who decides to go to detox or promotes harm reduction for the good of the community. It can further stigmatize those who “fail” to meet these standards, however, thereby becoming a mechanism of symbolic violence. Young people's stories about the non-existence and impossibility of community reflect an understanding that drug users—including themselves—inevitably fail to live up to these standards. It was alarming that some youth, like Kris in 2011, went so far as to connect this failure with a lack of basic humanity (a connection that implicated themselves as “not even people”):

DF: *What do you think of the idea that there is a “community” down here?*

Kris: *Most of the youth down here are here because they just want to get high. They're not here because they want to make friends. It's hard to make friends or have a “community” if people aren't even people really. They're not friends; they're drug users.*

(Kris, age 23, personal communication)

Discussion

There are several ways to interpret young people's critiques of conventional community narratives in the context of drug scene entrenchment (i.e., that it always implies commonality, mutual responsibility, solidarity, and stability). Firstly, it is important to

acknowledge that the commonality implied by community does not have to imply cohesion and social support. Indeed, the utopian community has perhaps always been a symbolic and abstract representation of a much messier reality. Our data illustrate that fragmentation, alienation, and conflict themselves constitute powerful and shared organizing symbols in the day-to-day lives of young drug users in Vancouver. Additionally, community may not be an integrating mechanism as much as an aggregating device; that is, a whole formed by combining several (often disparate) elements (Cohen 1985; Gigengack 2000). For example, if we are to speak of a street youth or drug user community in the Downtown South, this will necessarily encompass both house punk youth who are new to the scene as well as “real street kids” who have “grown up on the streets” (Fast et al. 2009a; Karabanow 2004; Lucchini 1996). These boundaries are symbolically complex, and it could be argued that the hallmark of community membership is a shared understanding of these symbols and the ways in which they order everyday life (Cohen 1985; Thornton 1996).

As observed in other settings (Moore 2004), young people did articulate a shared set of knowledge, practices, and morals needed to navigate street life or “the game.” However, the youth with whom we spoke were generally critical of this game and took little pride in cultivating the savvy or street smarts it implies. A street youth or drug user community—a collective identity—meant shared social-spatial destinies: ending up in jail, as a crackhead living in the Downtown Eastside, or worst of all, dead (Fast et al. 2009b). For this reason, young people consistently attempted to distance themselves from stable membership in the drug user or street youth community, indicating that if they could “get out,” they would (Lucchini 1996). Community can and does occur in circumstances of violence, abuse, addiction, and alienation, and it can give meaningful expression to experiences of marginalization (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Gigengack 2000). What our work challenges are romanticized depictions of gangs or “street families” that overemphasize young people’s agency and collective coping strategies in spite of social suffering. Those that identified with the idea lamented rather than celebrated their membership in the drug user community, indicating that it precluded productive and responsible citizenship within mainstream society—something all of our participants, when reflecting on their current situation in 2012, greatly desired. For these youth, the streets were a sort of “space in-between” their often troubled pasts and the “normal life” they longed for—a space in which many felt hopelessly trapped (Lucchini 1996). They were not able to return to the homes of their childhood, nor were they able to acquire the “place” and “job” that would signal their exit from street life. For many, the language of community obscured this larger reality as well as their everyday lived experience, particularly the violent features of social exchanges and networks on the streets (Tait 1993).

For many participants, the self-destruction, violence, and social suffering synonymous with intensive and prolonged drug scene involvement were the antitheses of community. Many argued that drug users were not capable of community. Bourgois and others (Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) have illustrated how the concepts of everyday (Scheper-Hughes 1992), structural (Farmer, Connors, and Simmons 1996), and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001) can help us to link behavior that is commonly associated with psychopathology or immorality (e.g., the abuse that girlfriends suffer at the hands of their boyfriends) with larger power relations and the pragmatic realities of street life. The everyday violence that pervades the lives of young people who use drugs on the streets is at once highly visible (it was at many times all participants could talk about) and invisible, in the sense that it is taken for granted and internalized as “just the way things are.” Ongoing suffering in inner city settings like Vancouver’s inner city drug scene is rarely connected to the symbolic violence of embodied marginalization and social exclusion or the structural violence of neoliberal policies that lead to growing inequality in city centers (Harvey 2005); rather, it is frequently represented in the popular media as being caused by the “bad choices”

of the “immoral” or “sick” individuals who live there, and these discourses have also been taken up by those individuals themselves. The outright rejection of the possibility of a drug user or street youth community may reflect both a mechanism of and response to symbolic violence, however. Young people’s insistence that drug users could never develop community may reflect the capacity of symbolic violence to dehumanize drug users in relation to the notion of community. However, it may also reflect young people’s refusal to accept their place in the world. By rejecting the idea that they are a part of the drug user community or that it even exists—or by pointing to moments when community was possible for them (as Alice did when she described her self-initiated outreach work)—youth perhaps reinforced the potential for change in their own social position and created space for alternative social destinies (Shoveller et al. 2007).

The notion of community is highly attractive, as is the potential for empowerment, capacity building, and cultural appropriateness that community often implies. For these reasons, organizations run exclusively by and for members of the community (e.g., Kerr et al. 2006), or alternatively, an “indigenous leader” (a person or small group of people that are thought to have inherent authority within the community; e.g., Wiebel 1993) is often called upon to represent the interests of drug using populations in academic, policy, and popular forums. This assumes, however, that groups of people who use drugs in close proximity to each other identify with their peers or want to identify with them. Our results show that identity can be constructed in opposition to peers or to specific notions of a drug user or street youth community. Furthermore, our results challenge the assumption that young people find their peers a more credible source of information or leadership than service workers and other adults (Mellanby, Rees, and Tripp 2000; Price and Knibbs 2008). Community-based and peer-driven interventions (e.g., Broadhead et al. 1995; Broadhead et al. 1998; Needle et al. 2005) may be inappropriate for youth who do not view a person in a similar drug entrenched situation as a legitimate source of help. Nor is it the case that young people always consider their peers to be more trustworthy; indeed, our results indicate that the opposite can be true. Social network interventions that utilize the community’s existing social networks to extend the reach, legitimacy, and effectiveness of harm reduction initiatives (e.g., Latkin et al. 2003; Latkin, Sherman, and Knowlton 2003) may be incongruent with the ways in which these networks are experienced by youth who use drugs on the streets. Social networks are deployed to demand social justice and a collective “right to the city,” but they are also used everyday to “track people down” for punishments related to drug debts or altercations within romantic relationships (Beazley 2002). In our setting and others, peer relationships, allegiances, and identities are complex and informed by power relations (including, notably, those of gender) and the constraints of poverty (Beazley 2002; Bourgois, Prince, and Moss 2004; Gigengack 1999; Price and Knibbs 2008). We must continue to look critically at the ways in which social networks simultaneously diminish and exacerbate harms, as young people navigate a constant tension between collective identities rooted in shared experiences of discrimination, and the individualism demanded by addiction in the context of material deprivation and social exclusion (Beazley 2003; Hecht 1998; Hengst 1997).

We do not want to argue that young people in our setting are better represented by academics, health care workers, and policymakers far removed from youths’ everyday lived realities. Nor are we saying that youth in our setting never benefit from peer-to-peer education and community-based interventions—they do. Furthermore, our arguments should not be generalized to all young people who use drugs on the streets of downtown Vancouver or even to all of the young people involved in this study at all points in time. Our study is more representative of the “highest risk” youth in Vancouver; it is notable that even our youngest participants had relatively extensive experience with drug use, crime, violence, and homelessness at the time of interview. However, our results do speak to the need for interventions that rely on both professional and peer staff, which can be accessed selectively

based on the needs of youth and caution against assuming that “community members” are always best suited to represent the interests of that “community.” Anthropologists are particularly well positioned to complicate these taken-for-granted understandings. Prolonged ethnography is needed to understand how people experience their social hierarchies, romantic relationships, and moralities across time and place and how these experiences intersect with ideas about community on the streets. The ethnographic/empirical “reality” we were presented with speaks to the contradictions that characterize these experiences, and points to how in some contexts, the language of community may be inappropriate. In these instances, this language is at best ignored as irrelevant, but at worst it becomes a mechanism of symbolic violence, whereby youth blame themselves for their inability to be “good” citizens and responsible members of “the community” (Moore and Fraser 2006).

If we seriously question the community model as a foundation for intervention and research in some settings, what might replace it? Perhaps it is not so much a matter of replacing this model as adapting it to incorporate young people’s analyses of their everyday experiences and the impact that deprivation plays in undermining positive experiences of community on the streets. When we asked young people about their experiences with community-based and peer-led interventions in 2011 and 2012, most said that in the present moment, they needed skills training, jobs, and a place to stay—a way out of the chronic poverty and social spatial marginalization they experience in the downtown core—more than they needed additional community-based and peer-driven interventions that provide them with harm reduction education and paraphernalia. Moreover, at times, community interventions that are integrated into the drug scene seem to be incongruous with youths’ desire to exit drug scene involvement and “rejoin society.” Low threshold harm reduction is essential to health promotion in downtown Vancouver, in order to keep young people who use drugs in this setting alive and prevent even further social suffering. However, the need for larger-scale structural interventions prior to or in combination with community-based and peer-driven approaches should not be overlooked. It is these kinds of structural interventions—for example, the creation of safe and accessible places of work, rest and recreation, and meaningful opportunities for education and employment—that have the potential to mediate those aspects of drug scene entrenchment (e.g., out-of-control drug use, extreme violence), which young people identify as the antithesis of community, and of the mutually supportive relationships that participants so greatly desired. As has been observed elsewhere (Waterson 1993), while the shared social interaction, interests, experience, skills, and perspectives that emerge from street life can provide the foundation for meaningful and long-term change, young people’s current day-to-day realities, in which they are consumed by a daily project of survival, arguably works against such a development among some groups of youth in our setting.

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