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

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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 ultimately "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.

Keywords

youth; drug scene; drug dealing; crime; boredom; morality

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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 chronic boredom (Stevens, 2011: 51; Ferrell, 2004; Hayward, 2007; Katz, 1988). 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; C. Richardson & Skott-Myhre, 2012; Shammass & 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 Stephen Collier and Andrew 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,” “boyfriends,” “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 and modernity asserts that boredom is a problem of excess – of having “a lot of nothing” (Goodstein, 2005) – work by a growing number of anthropologists has illustrated that, in the context of hypermarginalization, boredom seems to derive from being both under and overwhelmed (Jervis, Spicer, & Manson, 2003; Musharbash, 2007; O'Neill, 2014). Boredom was a vocabulary of motive youth used to explain why they had left the places of their childhoods and “ended up” in Vancouver (“I was just so bored at my group [government care] home”), how they transitioned into increasingly harmful drug use practices once on the streets (“I get bored of one drug and I move on to the next”), and why they wanted to exit Vancouver's inner city drug scene and involvement in dealing and crime (“I want to go back to school and get a job, because it's so boring out here”). Furthermore, youth used the language of boredom to

explain why, even after exiting the drug scene and involvement in dealing and crime for periods of time, they may re-enter these periodically as a way of achieving a desired sense of forward momentum in their lives – a sense that they were once again “in the center of *something*” – as opposed to bored and “trapped” in the margins. As we will show, both of these “ordinary affects” (Stewart, 2007) – boredom, and a sense of “being in the center of something” – powerfully shaped involvement in dealing and crime for the young men in this study.

Study setting

The city of Vancouver is simultaneously celebrated as one of the world’s most beautiful and livable cities, and criticized as the site of Canada’s poorest urban postal code and a thriving inner city, street based drug scene. In the public imagination, youth who are homeless, destitute, and visibly addicted to drugs in Vancouver are often defined through their relationships with this place. However, our long term ethnographic research with youth who occupy the margins of Vancouver indicate that their “senses of place” in the city – that is, the ordinary ways in which they engage with the urban landscape and find it significant (Basso, 1996) – are often far more expansive than these understandings allow, and articulate with remembered childhoods and imagined futures (Gordillo, 2004). The majority of those in this study came or fled to Vancouver from elsewhere – other cities, towns, and First Nations reservations.¹ In relation to these other places, Vancouver was frequently framed as the site of new and exciting opportunities for work, leisure, and home making. As has been argued for other urban settings around the globe (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Sassen, 2007), the youth in this study generally embraced, and felt embraced by, the big city dreams of capitalist consumption that Vancouver represented, in spite of growing up in circumstances marked by profound disadvantage in almost all instances. Once in Vancouver, youth found themselves inhabiting the margins of urban space, in ways that often mirrored the marginalization they had experienced in the places of their childhood. However, Vancouver itself was *not* understood as marginal, and youth consistently asserted a sense of belonging in the city and the opportunities it represented, in spite of their current location on the streets. The possibilities of place that they enjoyed imagining for themselves included nine to five jobs and engaging careers, participating in leisure activities in the evenings and on the weekends, and creating a family with a romantic soul mate. Youth had to constantly navigate this simultaneous sense of inclusion and exclusion, as they attempted to make a home for themselves in Vancouver. In this context, many were willing to entertain extraordinary levels of danger, and fantasy, in order to find a way into the life worlds they imagined for themselves there (Mains 2007).

Findings

Characterizing street level dealing and crime in Greater Vancouver—Over three quarters of the young men in this study had engaged in dealing at some point during the study period. Of course, dealing is an extremely broad category. In the context of

¹In Canada, a reserve is a tract of land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the use of a First Nations band. This land continues to be held in trust by the Crown and subject to various permissions and inhibitions. Reserves therefore continue to function as colonial spaces, and powerfully shape the opportunities and movements of Indigenous people – including to places like downtown Vancouver.

Vancouver's street based drug scene, this can refer to anything from "flipping" small quantities of drugs for minor amounts of profit (which is often immediately used towards supporting one's own drug use), to transporting and selling larger quantities of drugs for one of Greater Vancouver's gangs, which could result in thousands of dollars of profit per week. There continues to be significant debate surrounding what constitutes a "gang" in diverse settings. As a number of criminologists have pointed out, the term can encompass everything from "troublesome" groups of youth, to "crime that is organized," to "organized crime" (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Densley, 2013; Schelling, 1971). For the young men in this study, however, there was no ambiguity surrounding this term. When youth referred to gangs, they were referring to both the organized crime syndicates who largely control the drug trade in British Columbia (namely, a North American outlaw motorcycle gang and transnational Chinese gang), as well as a handful of more local street gangs. As has been described elsewhere (Densley, 2014), while these more local street gangs may have begun as loose groupings of youth formed in high schools and juvenile detention facilities, as they have grown and formed alliances with organized crime syndicates they have also come to play a significant role in large scale drug trafficking in British Columbia, including across the Canada-US border.

With the exception of two young men who identified themselves as members of a well established Aboriginal street gang originating in Eastern Canada, the young men in this study were not members of gangs. However, the majority of the young men who self identified as being, or having recently been, involved in dealing were tenuously affiliated with one of the gangs described above. These affiliations took the form of street level subcontract illicit employment (Karandinos et al., 2014); young men described themselves as working for a gang member "employer" or "boss" by dealing drugs. They were also frequently subcontracted by gang members – who, it should be noted, were themselves likely very low level players in gang hierarchies – to engage in robbery and car theft, and the delivery of brutal physical punishments related to drug debts and other kinds of "beefs" (i.e., heated conflicts). Similar to what has been observed elsewhere (Densley, 2013; Windle & Briggs, 2015a), after an initial period of more close supervision, this kind of loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime was usually carried out quite independently by young men, who could themselves become a boss to their own set of street level workers as they were given increasing amounts of responsibility and drugs to move by their own employers. All of these employer-employee relationships could dissolve quite abruptly – as, for example, when a young person ended up "doing their own product" (i.e., using the drugs they were supposed to be selling) and could no longer maintain a profitable relationship with their employer. While the gangs described above are generally characterized by established leadership and hierarchies among members (Venkatesh, 1997), at the street level we observed that relationships between gang member employers and loosely gang affiliated, street level workers were much more ephemeral – collaborations formed and disbanded over time, albeit usually with the same gang. During the study period in 2009, Vancouver was the site of a gang war in which more than 20 people were killed as street gangs vied for control of particular dealing turf. The street based drug scene in Greater Vancouver was altered by these events. The young men in this study described local street gangs becoming increasingly disorganized, as they rapidly recruited members and affiliates on the streets and

in criminal justice facilities in an effort to increase their numbers. In the absence of the more long term, established relationships that usually underpin gang membership and even affiliation (Densley, 2012), the employer-employee relationships described above became even more fleeting.

Initiations

Many of the young men in this study began engaging in dealing and crime in some form at a very early age, in a number of cases long before they became entrenched in Vancouver's inner city drug scene. Consistent with previous work, a significant number of youth were initiated into these activities by male family members and "father figures" who were themselves involved in dealing and crime (Densley & Stevens, 2014). In the neighbourhoods of their childhoods, young men frequently recalled being "bad kids," "troublemakers," "shit disturbers," "hoodlums," and "go to guys" for friends and peers who wanted to buy drugs. Youth seemed to relish the opportunity to recount their skill at acting as the "nominated buyer" (Moyle & Coomber, 2015) for friends at such early ages (a skill for which they were recompensed with a portion of the drugs purchased). However, they also often made sense of these initiations in hindsight by recalling painful childhood memories of violence, marginalization, and boredom ("we were just sitting around"), as well as desires for different kinds of futures.

Paul knew almost nothing about his father except that he was in an outlaw motorcycle gang. He described over the course of an interview in 2009 how he was recruited into dealing at age thirteen in his hometown in the interior of British Columbia:

I was a messed up kid. My mom had gotten [re]married when I was younger, to some dude who decided he wanted to kick the shit out of me. I was in a coma [as a result of a beating he endured from his stepfather]. I was angry as hell, right? I was basically raised on violence.

Growing up, my old man wasn't always the greatest influence, to say the least. He wasn't around [because he was serving a 15 year jail sentence in the United States], but he was always a knight in shining armor to me. When I was 13 years old I had the balls to walk up to a group of kids [at school] and pull out a really big knife and threaten them for something they said to a friend of mine. Basically, they called her the 'n word,' right? And then one night soon after, all of us from school and shit, we were sitting around, drinking at the park and stuff, and this older guy came up and he's like, 'Hey kid, come sit down. I saw what you did the other day at school. That took a lot of balls, you know? And you won the police game. You were even able to get rid of the weapon.' He talks to me for about two and a half hours. By the end of it I came out a drug dealer. That was about the transition. It wasn't so much, 'You want to go out there and sell drugs?' It was, 'Hey look, by the time you're sixteen you can have a nice new car, whatever you want,' you know? It was like, do this, and you can have all the things you've always wanted.

As, like, a poor kid growing up in a shitty neighborhood, you know – like, that all sounded pretty fucking good. (Paul, Caucasian, 22 years of age at time of interview)

Consistent with previous research (Chettleburgh, 2007; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Pitts, 2008), neighbourhood hangouts, foster care homes, and criminal justice facilities were all sites of initiation into dealing and crime. This usually initially occurred via friendships developed with male gang members who were commonly much older (see also Gwadz et al., 2009). As Terry described during an interview in 2008:

Foster care [in a suburb of Greater Vancouver] was, like, really *menacing*. Like – it was a bad situation. It really changed my life. Everything was too lenient. We ended up going out at night to do stuff like, um, stealing cars, doing robberies. [Gang members] would just show up at the foster house, right? In their nicest clothes, with their nicest cars, stuff like that. It would always be when they had a bunch of money – and they'd want to make some more money out of it. So they'd come to us and they'd be like, enticing you to do it, like, 'I'll give you like 500 bucks right now, but next week you gotta bring me a [stolen] car.' And that's how I got hooked up with those people. They came over to the foster house. They partied with us. They drank with us.

In some ways it's the time of our lives, right? We were just sitting around, bored out of our minds.

But then it started to become more aggressive. The whole time I was doing that stuff I remember I had this really vivid image in my head that I was going to die – like I could picture it *exactly*, how it would happen. I was robbing [marijuana] grow ops every weekend. [Gangs] like people who are young to do that stuff, because you don't get busted, really. And when you do, it's very minimal sentencing [as a result of Canadian legislation such as the Young Offenders Act], so they don't have to worry about people narking [cooperating with police], cause you're gonna be out in, like, two weeks anyways. (Terry, Indigenous, 20 years of age at time of interview)

Interestingly, a number youth emphasized how past experiences working – and eventually losing – legal jobs intersected with cultivating a “hustler’s ambition.” Slightly less than half of youth had at one time been legally employed; a number moved between crime and legal employment. For example, while Terry had been initiated into crime when he was 13 years old, for several years he moved between legal and illegal work. When he was 15, he hopped a train to a city in the interior of British Columbia and found temporary work clearing the debris out of construction sites. Upon returning to Greater Vancouver when he was 16, he secured work with a local contracting company with the help of one of his foster fathers. Terry spent the next year and a half working on the construction of new Boston Pizza restaurant locations. Simultaneously, a friend from one of his old government care homes unofficially moved into his apartment in a suburb of Greater Vancouver. Through the gang connections the two of them had established while in care, they began dealing drugs out of the apartment complex where they lived. Eventually, they began doing their own product (primarily crack cocaine), which quickly resulted in the loss of the apartment they shared and homelessness on the streets of downtown Vancouver, where the vast majority of the city's services for the homeless are located.

Steven described his “working years” during a first interview during 2008. His story was typical of accounts we heard from other young men who had previously been employed – with the exception of the fact that he had, for a time at least, managed to obtain increasingly rare union jobs in northern British Columbia through his father’s connections:

I only have a grade ten education, but I had four jobs during my working years. First job I had was with my dad, and that was my introduction into the steel industry. I was making so much money I didn’t even know what to spend it on, which is kind of how the crack [cocaine use] started in. But I didn’t like how their union was set up. So I left there and went to a different union place, worked there for about a year. And then in the winter, I don’t know, there seems to be a lack of construction, and so they laid me off and I started using [crack cocaine] a lot again, cause I still had all this extra money. Came down here to Vancouver. And then when it came time to go back to work [because his money had run out] I started working somewhere else – a window place out in Langley [a suburb of Greater Vancouver]. Worked there for like six months.

I don’t know what happened. Ended up breaking up with my baby’s mom, and then the drugs started in even harder, and that’s when I started working the stupid, boring temp jobs – lame, lame jobs that just couldn’t hold my attention span. And then I was on the streets because of the crack and losing the place we had, and all the usual bullshit. (Steven, Caucasian, 22 years of age at time of interview)

Importantly, Steven’s account underscores a connection that a number of other young men also made: namely, how the relatively lucrative employment opportunities in British Columbia’s industry towns can facilitate early disconnection from high school and entry into the workforce. For Steven and a number of others, this early transition from school to work coincided with their initiation into the drug scenes that frequently exist on the peripheries of British Columbia’s major industries. It also coincided with becoming a young father in a number of cases.

When DF met Steven in 2008, he was homeless and flipping drugs on and off (referred to elsewhere in the literature as “user-dealing”; Moyle & Coomber, 2015) while panhandling on the streets of downtown Vancouver. A year later, his material circumstances had changed rapidly. Largely as a result of drug scene connections he had made through his previous industry and construction jobs, he initially became what has been described as a “dealer’s apprentice” (Moyle & Coomber, 2015); that is, he developed a working relationship with a higher level, more commercially motivated gang member/dealer employer, who provided him with quantities of crack cocaine to sell on credit. However, from this type of apprenticing Steven rapidly transitioned into a situation where he had his own street level workers or apprentices selling drugs for him. During a recorded conversation with DF in 2012, Steven reflected on that period of time in his life – at which point he was once again destitute, living in a single room occupancy hotel (SRO) in downtown Vancouver, and struggling with his addiction to crack cocaine:

For someone who’d been working, and trying to pay for most of their shit through working, and then losing another job, or getting a job that pays less – I eventually sorta looked into another way to make money. I was like, the economy’s going

down hard [a reference to the 2008 global economic recession], I'm gonna make my money dealing drugs. Hustler's ambition, right?

One day a friend of mine [from doing construction work] just offered me a job and said, 'Here, I'll give you bags of crack to sell, so see what you can do.' And then when I showed him I could do that it was, 'Here's a phone,' right? 'Whenever I'm not around, you answer it. This phone's gonna ring and you go see my people to pick shit up.' Next thing I knew I was picking up [drugs] off, like, harsh gangsters and shit. Big time suppliers. You don't pay them you'll end up getting your fingers chopped off or something, right?

Within six months everything changed. Now I have a car. Now I'm making deliveries. Now I have people working for me, right? I spread out to the Tri Cities [three adjacent suburbs of Vancouver]. Got pretty big, pretty quick. I was living with my girlfriend. And basically I'd just sit on my ass and they'd call me. 'I'm finished. I've got your money.' I started down on Granville [Street in downtown Vancouver] small, and by the end I had a four thousand dollar a day business. (Steven, Caucasian, 26 years of age at time of interview)

Money, drugs, and fame – and looking like just another rich kid in a mall

Dealing and crime represented a way into an alternative material world in the city, in which risk could be met with substantial financial reward (Adler, 1993). Steven's insistence that he was at one time making four thousand dollars a day, however, was almost certainly an exaggeration. Although he may have been moving four thousand dollars worth of drugs on some occasions, most of the profits would have been handed off to his employer. But, as previous research has demonstrated (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1996; Sandberg, 2008; Stevens, 2011), dealing and crime were also a way into alternative value systems in which achievements, defeats, and understandings of the good were based not on official education level or the length of a resume, but on, for example, the ability to successfully "risk risk" without being caught by police, or edged out by others playing the same "game." In addition to mediating experiences of boredom, animated and oftentimes fantastical narratives of crime related achievements and defeats on the streets were a way of clarifying these value systems, as well as the behaviors that should follow from them (Lauger, 2014; Sandberg, 2010).

Beyond allowing young men to accrue respect and various forms of social, cultural, and street capital in the margins, we observed that becoming immersed in these alternative value systems seemed to give youth a new and deeply desired affective sense of forward momentum in their lives – a sense that they were finally, as more than one youth put it, "in the center of *something*." As Jordan explained about his return to dealing in downtown Vancouver in 2013 (and then again in 2015, using strikingly similar language):

Honestly, I was just so *bored*. Right? And the crime is – it's a rush. I'm a good worker, so the guy I know keeps giving me more and more responsibility with his product, right? And at least, down here, this is *something*. I'm good at it, right? I'm actually really good at all this. (Jordan, Caucasian, 28 years old at time of interview)

It is important to recognize that for many youth in our setting, dealing and crime were not just about achieving respect, capital, and a sense of forward momentum within an alternative world of the streets. These activities could also often be about the chance to achieve the same kinds of social spatial mobility, admiration, and routine that “normal” jobs in Vancouver afforded (bearing in mind that what youth often envisioned as “normal” jobs in Vancouver were the kind of high paying, professional jobs that would provide access to one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world). As Paul reflected proudly in 2009:

Walking down the street, most people thought I was a geeky ass student, right? I was eighteen and driving a brand new Mustang around. If anyone asked me, I just said, ‘My aunt and uncle bought it for me.’ If it came to like, me going anywhere, going to the mall or whatever, I looked like just another normal, rich kid. I’d be buying my workers new clothes, right? ‘Let’s go to Gucci.’ ‘All my boys here need new gear.’ (Paul, Caucasian, 22 years of age at time of interview)

Steven echoed Paul’s sentiments in 2012:

That lifestyle was just kind of awesome. Not the whole, like, doing drugs and getting all fucked up part, but like –I would walk into a nice condo, okay, during the [2010 Winter] Olympics? And I would basically go and sit down with people from all over the world. And we’d just be shooting the shit, smoking, drinking, enjoying each other’s company. And I would walk out with like thirteen hundred dollars of my own money just because of, you know, selling drugs. (Steven, Caucasian, 26 years old at time of interview)

The moral logics of the gang

The vast majority of the young men in this study were not members of gangs. However, without exception they all actively embraced the gang as an intelligible site of moral reasoning and ethical action, and pointed to what we are calling particular “moral logics of the gang” to make sense of their involvement in loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime. As Paul explained during a recorded conversation with DF in 2011:

I have a *hero complex*– somebody says ‘Go after women and children’ and I say ‘Go get the hell out of here or you’re going to be the one who’s next!’ Right? I’ve had a few situations [related to “enforcing” the payment of drug debts through violence] where families were about to get involved, and I don’t agree with that. It’s not acceptable – like, if you look at most films about the Italian Mob, and stuff, you see that families are off limits, right? A guy will get his head crushed in a vice, but no one dares go after their family. That was something I *lived by* at that point in time. It’s a gang thing. When it came to business I was a very ruthless individual – but there were rules.

And I loved that part of it, right? (Paul, Caucasian, 24 years old at time of interview)

Youth emphasized repeatedly that the gang was a site in which the lines around physical violence were clearly drawn, and forms of protection were founded and guaranteed. This ethical orientation towards violence as governable seemed to be a comfort to many youth,

for whom chaos and instability had often been the only constants in their lives growing up (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Youth also seemed to embrace the lines drawn by the gang around drug use. While addiction could be a significant factor in leading young men like Steven to become increasingly involved in dealing and crime, even these young men articulated a strongly held belief that highly visible and “out of control” addictions to crack cocaine, heroin, and crystal methamphetamine were prohibited while carrying out even loosely gang affiliated, street level criminal activities. This led some young men to joke that involvement in these activities was its own particularly effective form of “addiction treatment.” The active policing of addictions by gang member employers – through violence, or enforced entry into a treatment program, for example – was in fact quite rare. In fact, it is plausible that street entrenched young men were actively recruited to engage in the most highly visible and risky aspects of dealing and crime because of their struggles with addiction and perceived “desperation” to make money – although young men very rarely characterized their employer-employee relationships this way. A more common scenario described by youth was that, as a result of worsening addictions, they became increasingly unable to meet the demands of those they were working for – or started using their own product – and were violently sidelined as a result.

On the streets of Vancouver, young men drew on particular moral logics of the gang to position themselves as heroes who protected innocent women and children. They also frequently positioned themselves as loyal workers who did what they were told by their employers and kept their mouths shut no matter what – even if it meant going to jail. “Jail is something we all want to avoid,” Paul insisted in 2011, although the excitement in his voice painted a more complex picture. “But when you *do* get locked up, there’s pride in that, right? You may have taken a pinch, but you did it right cause you kept your mouth shut and didn’t give anybody up.”

“That’s something to be *extremely* proud of in that lifestyle,” Paul’s best friend and “business associate” Connor added forcefully. “You get *respect* for it. The top guys [gang members in jail] see that, and usually you end up doing some stuff for one of them when you get out.”

Given the ephemeral quality of relationships between street level, subcontracted workers and gang member employers, young men’s loyalty seemed to be more to this particular moral logic of gang (i.e., keeping your mouth shut and taking a pinch), as opposed to a particular employer with whom they had developed an enduring friendship (Windle & Briggs, 2015a). However, it should also be noted that young men could face extreme physical punishments from a wide variety of social actors on the streets (not just gang members) for breaking the much more widely shared and strictly enforced moral code that dictates that “no one talks to the cops” under any circumstances (Fast, Shoveller, Small, & Kerr, 2013).

Complex subjectivities like the hero who protects women and children, and the loyal worker who keeps his mouth shut and goes to jail, should not be reduced to or celebrated as oppositional identities forged in the margins (Karandinos et al., 2014). Far from existing in opposition to state control, these subjectivities exist in mutually perpetuating and complicitous relationships with problematic state infrastructures, political ideologies, and

technologies of administration, such as a criminal justice system that targets young men, and in particular young, racialized men (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). The near inevitability of jail time for young men who are street entrenched and engaged in the most visible and risky forms of dealing and crime to an extent engenders subjectivities like the loyal worker. In turn, by reworking youth's experiences of marginalization and boredom across time and place into more desirable personal trajectories – including a sense of being in the center of something, even if this means being in jail – subjectivities like the loyal worker perpetuate youth's engagement in dealing and crime on the streets, fueling arguments for heightened policing and tougher jail sentences in response to escalating “public disorder” from some segments of society.

Moreover, while moral logics of the gang were used by young men to make sense of practices that are typically at odds with normative claims of morality (such as acts of extreme violence; Garcia, 2014), youth also used these logics to convey highly conventional understandings of the good – such as the imperative to protect women and children. Subjectivities like the heroic gangster engaged in explicit ways with state infrastructures and technologies of administration (e.g., the broken child welfare system in British Columbia; Turpel-Lafond, 2006, 2007). A large number of youth saw the gang as exacting punishments where the state had failed. On the streets and in jail, rape and child molestation got you killed. Extreme acts of violence, when administered according to a strict moral logic, lent the gang a sort of ethical superiority to the state for many youth. This was particularly the case, perhaps, for those young men whose own childhood abuse had gone unacknowledged by the government, or occurred while they were in government care.

In developing the concept of the moral logics of the gang, our purpose is not to attribute unitary moralities to the young men in this study. If the violence that accompanies involvement in loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime was consistently used and recognized by these youth as a way of “getting ahead” in the city, righting grievous wrongdoings, and mediating boredom, it was also regarded as traumatizing in many moments (Karandinos et al., 2014). Consistent with previous work (Karandinos et al., 2014: 9), young men often described and even celebrated violent altercations as “fun, exciting events rife with potential” (see Connor's narrative below). Simultaneously, many youth had experienced tremendous loss as a result of these altercations. A number had seen friends or family members get severely injured or even die. Ironically, the moral logics of the gang both put youth at extreme risk for harms (including mental health issues as a result of violence witnessed and perpetrated), and gave them a sense of being “untouchable,” often for the first time in their lives. As Connor recounted in 2011:

One of our friends got stabbed in the heart four times and had a brick dropped on his head in North Vancouver [a suburb of Greater Vancouver].

At that point in time, my friend dying wasn't *glamorous*– but it kind of was, I guess? It was the fact that the police had to phone an emergency response team to keep all of us who came down to kill those other guys in order. You know, you can't mess with us! We got an army behind us! We were *untouchable*, you know? After my friend was killed, I was on a high for the longest period of time. (Connor, Caucasian, 23 years of age at time of interview)

Attempted exits

"I sit back everyday and I regret," Steven said in 2012. "It's not like they say it is in rap videos or movies and shit. It's a lot more painful. Although the whole bling bling [money] thing is there – then it's gone." At a certain point, most of the young men in this study vowed to leave dealing and crime behind. While involvement in these activities could generate a desired sense of forward momentum punctuated by exciting (and terrifying) events, young men also frequently complained that dealing and crime, too, involved a lot of "sitting around" and "doing nothing" – including while in jail (Klein, 1997). Because they were most often the very lowest, street level players in criminal hierarchies, and therefore by no means untouchable, youth's involvement in dealing and crime inevitably landed them in jail. In contrast to previous work demonstrating that user-dealing can provide an opportunity to avoid violent and shameful forms of crime (Moyle & Coomber, 2015), for the young men in this study involvement in street level dealing via a gang member employer almost always quickly embroiled them in other, highly violent forms of crime such as armed robbery and assault. With only a handful of exceptions, all of the young men in this study had spent time in jail for drug trafficking as well as assault and robbery; approximately half of young men had been incarcerated on multiple occasions. The near inevitability of youth's incarceration betrayed how illusory any sense of social spatial mobility in the city really was. Going to jail often meant that youth "lost everything" – their money, their housing, and most if not all of the possessions they had accumulated – which frequently precipitated periods of intense drug use binging and homelessness on the streets of downtown Vancouver once they got out of jail. A number of young men seemed to be haunted by the violence they had witnessed and perpetrated, and paralyzed by paranoia. Terry was never able to shed the sense that he was about to die. "Even now, especially when I go out to where I used to live [and deal drugs out of an apartment], I have this really strong gut feeling that I'm gonna get stabbed by someone," he said in 2012. "And they'll just leave me there alone to die."

As the study period progressed, young men generally emphasized the extent to which they had allowed themselves to be blatantly manipulated by gang member employers during the early days of their "friendships" with these usually much older individuals. However, by the time they were engaging in these sorts of critical reflections, school incompleteness combined with permanent criminal records had often stripped them of the opportunity to obtain meaningful legal employment. Moreover, as a result of worsening addictions and mental health issues, youth could find themselves both locked out of the legal labor market, and increasingly sidelined by their gang member employers. In this context, young men like Steven remained resistant to accepting the lower paid, oftentimes temporary, and largely unskilled work that was available. Instead, many young men expressed future aspirations that far outstripped their current circumstances, education levels, and training. They described grand plans to start million dollar businesses or go to university. Those youth who did enroll in education or training programs, or even began the process of looking into these programs, often became overwhelmed and quickly gave up. For these young men, success in the risky but potentially lucrative world of dealing and crime could ultimately be viewed as preferable to the shame of accepting or failing to obtain a job that "no one else wanted," or struggling through a school program.

At the beginning of 2012, Paul and Connor were living in a single room occupancy hotel in downtown Vancouver, using crystal methamphetamine daily, and half heartedly trying to get work with a brick laying crew. “I’ve had numerous offers [from gang members] to go back to work, though,” Paul confided to DF proudly, eager to communicate that in spite of his current circumstances, at any moment he could be back on top in the world of crime. “I’m still getting them. I don’t know. Offers are getting really good. The last offer I had, buddy showed up in the nicest car, dressed in his nicest clothes, and then made me an amazing offer. I told him no though. I don’t want to do it.”

Later in the conversation, Paul admitted, “I tried writing a resume. There’s nothing on it, right?” By the end of that year, he had returned to dealing and crime, after he and his girlfriend had a baby.

Discussion

In this paper, we have demonstrated how involvement in loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime could mediate young men’s experiences of social suffering across time and place, arguing that these regimes of living 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. In doing so, we build on and extend previous work highlighting how dealing, crime, and gangs embroil youth in complex material, moral, and experiential worlds that are governed by their own codes, boundaries, and meanings (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1996; Ferrell, 2004; Hayward, 2007; Katz, 1988; Moyle & Coomber, 2015; Sandberg, 2008; Stevens, 2011; Wakeman, 2016). As James Densley and Alex Stevens (2014) have argued, youth themselves often recognized that these worlds do not exist in opposition to “mainstream” worlds of capitalist consumption, violence, and hedonism – rather, they are intimately related. In our setting and others, street level dealing, crime, and gangs are often understood as a *way into* big city dreams, and what many of the young men in this study would call “normal” futures, even as these activities often ultimately work to entrench youth’s exclusion from these dreams and futures (Sassen, 2007).

For the young men in this study, dealing and crime allowed them to make money, assert hierarchies, wield reputations, and orchestrate various other achievements and defeats with an intensity – an affective sense of forward momentum, of “being in the center of something” – that would not have been possible for most in the legal economy. They allowed youth to belong in the city of Vancouver in ways that had previously only been imagined, and were deeply desired. In contrast to previous work (Moyle & Coomber, 2015), dealing and crime did bring many young men into the places that “normal, rich kids” had access to, such as high priced condos and designer clothing stores – for a time, at least. However, just as they were marginalized within the legal economy, youth were also marginalized within the material and moral worlds of dealing and crime. Many “rose to glory,” only to find themselves incarcerated and destitute once again, with nothing to show for their previous success (before he returned to dealing in 2012, Paul often joked that the only thing he had left from his former “glory days” of crime was a green Adidas track suit jacket).

Our findings powerfully underscore that the regimes of living enacted by individuals and collectivities in the margins, such as street level dealing and crime, ultimately often end up raising as many ethical problems as they solve (Collier & Lakoff, 2005). The reputations and loyalties, or street capital, youth had worked so hard to accumulate with their gang member employers and street level workers could not be translated into the forms of social, cultural, and symbolic capital that would allow them to actually transcend their marginality – by entering mainstream worlds of school and work, for example (Abel & Frohlich, 2012; Moule Jr, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013). Rather, dealing and crime “embedded” them in cycles of incarceration, destitution, addictions, and mental health crises that ultimately reinforced their exclusion – and could also result in them being sidelined by their gang member employers (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2012). Young men’s exclusion was further reinforced by early school leaving in a number of cases. In striking contrast to previous work (Densley & Stevens, 2014; Vigil, 1988; Wacquant, 2008), this study revealed how the *availability* of employment can result in early school leaving among some young men, as well as early exposure to the drug scenes that exist on the peripheries of particular kinds of industries. For some young men in this study, involvement in British Columbia’s more rural and remote drug scenes led to problematic drug use and particular kinds of “connections” – both of which shaped their involvement in loosely gang affiliated, street level dealing and crime once on the streets of Vancouver. Future research is needed to unpack these dynamics further in our setting.

Given our findings, it would seem that the scaling up of addiction treatment is an important step in reducing involvement in dealing and crime among youth in our setting – particularly among those for whom the imperatives of addiction and day to day survival in the context of extreme urban poverty necessitate involvement in the most lucrative forms of income generation. And yet, access to drug treatment is clearly not enough. Our long term ethnographic research with youth has consistently demonstrated that, even when they have succeeded in exiting dealing and crime, getting clean off drugs, and securing relatively stable housing, many eventually begin lamenting the boredom of their daily routines. For a number of young men, a sense that they now have nothing left to do beyond “sitting around” in social housing on welfare – where they are safe, perhaps, from “risk,” but not from the structural violence of blank resumes, school incompleteness, joblessness, and boredom – could generate significant anxiety. As Stephen Wakeman (2016) argues in his work with heroin user-dealers in “austerity Britain,” we need to ask ourselves serious questions about what youth are expected to *do next*, in the absence of meaningful opportunities for work, recreation, and relaxation. It is hardly surprising that, in our setting and others, young men often find themselves being drawn back into the rapid succession of risks and rewards that characterize street level dealing and crime as a way of mediating boredom, and achieving a sense of “being in the center of something” again.

Employment is widely recognized as a determinant of health, but when it comes to hypermarginalized youth who use drugs, the role of employment in promoting wellbeing is often subordinated to other concerns (L. Richardson, Sherman, & Kerr, 2012). The results of this study highlight the central importance of meaningful labour market participation in the futures and forms of belonging young men imagined for themselves in the city. Many of those in this study would not have been able to enter directly into desired forms of

conventional, nine to five employment due to the high levels of chaos and instability that marked their everyday lives – but nor were they generally satisfied with low threshold job programs that involved picking up garbage and removing graffiti, for example. Programs and services that focus on creating work opportunities must therefore include a consideration of what constitutes meaningful work for youth, as well as varying levels of job structure and requirements, ranging from low threshold, part time jobs that provide an entry into work routines and responsibilities, to full time, conventional labour market participation (L. Richardson et al., 2012). Previous work has highlighted the potential utility of pairing youth with criminal records and a history of involvement in dealing and crime with local professionals, business owners, unions, and post secondary institutions, in order to provide them with apprenticeships, job training, and learning based projects (Karabanow, 2004; Willging, Quintero, & Lilliot, 2011). In order to be effective, however, these kinds of approaches must include mechanisms through which youth can advance from low threshold programs to sustainable and secure employment (Gwadz et al., 2009). Access to short term work, training, and education programs, in the absence of opportunities for advancement, may actually have a deleterious rather than beneficial effect on youth, who are already generally skeptical that “the system” can work for “people like them” in any meaningful and lasting way.

There is also overwhelming evidence to suggest that early developmental interventions are the most effective way to mediate future dealing and crime related harms among youth (Elman, 2012; Toumbourou et al., 2007). It has long been recognized that the progression to harmful forms of crime can be moderated by programs delivered through the school years – beginning with preschool (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). Indeed, the findings of this study underscore the importance of adopting a life course perspective in order to meaningfully address involvement in dealing and crime among youth in our and other similar settings (Hser, Longshore, & Anglin, 2007; Moule et al., 2013; Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant, & Lovegrove, 2009). As young men attempted to make sense of their involvement in these activities in the context of this study, they referenced numerous critical moments or transitions during childhood and early adolescence. These critical moments and transitions included being continually uprooted while in government care (and then again upon “aging out” of care at 19 years of age); exposure to highly unstable home environments that were characterized by physical violence and extreme poverty; early disconnection from school and entry into the workforce; and the stresses of, and expectations associated with, becoming a young father. While these experiences seem to reflect the high levels of chaos they experienced during childhood and adolescence, young men simultaneously emphasized how crushing experiences of boredom across time and place also propelled them towards the material, moral, and affective worlds of dealing and crime from a very early age, and powerfully shaped how the “choice” to continue engaging in these activities – in spite of the acknowledged risks and harms – was experienced. Interventions should focus on addressing these critical moments and transitions (e.g., extending the age at which youth age out of government care in the province, providing supports and programming for youth transitioning out of school and into the workforce), as well as mediating the crushing boredom youth experience across the life course. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the life course begins during pregnancy (Thornberry et al., 2009). In addition to being

impacted by intergenerational trauma and adversity, our findings illustrate that becoming a young father intersected with both early school leaving and initiation or re-entry into dealing and crime for a number of young men. While piecemeal supports for young parents exist in British Columbia (e.g., pregnancy outreach programs, young parenting programs that combine secondary school education with licensed childcare), there are very few services that cater specifically to the needs of young fathers, while some services are only available to young mothers. Perhaps most significantly, young parents continue to face extraordinary difficulties accessing family social housing in the province due to long wait lists and complicated bureaucratic processes. In addition to family housing, some of the young fathers in this study would have also benefited from low threshold job training, employment, and education programs that include childcare subsidies.

From a more general perspective, a life course perspective that focuses on the social determinants of health and harm will also help us to move away from demonizing narratives regarding the young, addicted, and usually male street based dealer or criminal who has an innate disposition for violence and lacks any sense of morality. This study builds on previous work to illustrate that these narratives exclude any consideration of how dealing and crime on the streets of Vancouver and elsewhere configure, and are configured by, complex value systems, moral logics, and affects, which are themselves inseparable from the wider landscapes of marginalization and desire experienced by youth across time and place.

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Table 1

Summary of study methodology and participant demographics

	Wave 1: Audio recorded, semi-structured interviews	Wave 2: Audio recorded, semi-structured interviews	Wave 3: Intensive ethnographic fieldwork documented through fieldnotes, audio recordings and photography	Wave 4: Ongoing ethnographic fieldwork documented through fieldnotes, audio recordings and photography
Dates	January 2008 – June 2008	July 2009 – April 2010	January 2011 – December 2012	January 2013 – May 2016
Recruitment process	Facilitated by a youth peer research associate	Facilitated by the staff at the ARYS research office, and Fast's ongoing relationships with local youth	Facilitated by DF's ongoing relationships with local youth	Facilitated by DF's ongoing relationships with local youth
Number of research participants	39 (18 men and 21 women ⁱⁱ)	28 (20 men and 8 women)	25 (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 youth)	15 (7 of whom had first been interviewed in 2008, and 3 of whom had first been interviewed in 2009; The remaining 5 participants were either close friends of, or romantically involved with, these 10 youth)
Age range of research participants	16 – 26 (median age = 22)	14 – 25 (median age = 21)	20 – 30 years of age (median age = 26)	24 – 34 years of age (median age = 28)
Ethnicity of research participants	65% Caucasian, 25% of Indigenous ancestry, 10% African Canadian ⁱⁱⁱ	72% Caucasian, 25% of Indigenous ancestry, 3% African Canadian	67% Caucasian, 25% of Indigenous ancestry, 8% African Canadian	60% Caucasian, 33% of Indigenous ancestry, 7% African Canadian
Number of follow-up interviews	None	12 (8 men and 4 women)	DF had contact with research participants on at least a monthly basis; in addition, 40 more formal, audio recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted during this time	DF had contact with research participants on at least a monthly basis; in addition, 56 more formal, audio recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted during this time
Primary research location	The ARYS research office in the Downtown South ^{iv}	The ARYS research office in the Downtown South	The places where youth were living, working, socializing and sleeping throughout Greater Vancouver	The places where youth were living, working, socializing and sleeping throughout Greater Vancouver
Data analysis	Data collection and analyses occurred concurrently as this research progressed. Interviews and field recordings were transcribed verbatim; ATLAS.TI software was then used to manage interview, fieldnote and visual data. In order to work through the volume of data collected, an initial coding framework that captured particular events and broad emergent themes (e.g., "initiation into dealing," "experiences with legal employment") was generated. Subsequent fieldwork and interviews allowed us to refine the coding framework in an iterative process (e.g., through the addition of new codes like "the moral logic of the gang"). DF coded and re-coded portions of the data multiple times over the study period.			
Ethical procedure	For all phases of the study, all participants provided their written informed consent and received a \$20 to \$30 honorarium for their participation in the more formal in-depth interviews (the amount of the honoraria was raised over the course of the study period). 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.			

ⁱⁱ Gender was self identified by participants.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ethnicity was self identified by participants.

^{iv} Youth enrolled in the ARYS cohort study frequent our office twice a year to complete an interviewer administered questionnaire and provide a blood sample; many also drop in regularly to use the phone, watch TV, drink coffee and pick up donated clothing, toiletries and snacks.