"Looking Out for Each Other": Street-Involved Youth's Perspectives on Friendship

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Abstract: In public discourses, friendships among street-involved youth are often regarded as sources of delinquent or risky behaviour. Through interviews with street-involved youth in Victoria, BC, we explore youth's ideas about their friendships. Our analysis suggests that the youth we interviewed have created a "relational refuge," that is, a social space and metaphorical home constituted through trust, proximity, and sharing of emotions and resources. Our research highlights how friendships can mediate some of the harmful aspects of street life for youth by enabling collective forms and practices of generalised reciprocity, acceptance and collaboration.

Keywords: street youth, friendship, homelessness, resilience, neoliberalism, Canada

Résumé : Dans le discours public, les amitiés entre jeunes de la rue sont souvent considérées comme des sources de comportement délinquant ou de comportement à risque. Sur la base d'entrevues menées avec des jeunes de la rue à Victoria (Colombie-Britannique), les auteurs explorent comment les jeunes conçoivent leurs amitiés. Leur analyse suggère que les jeunes interviewés se sont créé un « refuge relationnel », à savoir un espace social et un chez-soi métaphorique constitués à travers la confiance, la proximité et le partage d'émotions et de ressources. L'étude met en lumière la façon dont les amitiés peuvent compenser certains aspects néfastes de la vie de rue pour les jeunes, en favorisant des formes et des pratiques collectives de réciprocité, d'acceptation et de collaboration généralisées.

Mots-clés : Jeunes de la rue, amitié, itinérance, résilience, néolibéralisme, Canada

Introduction

At a meeting of More Than One Street (MTOS),[1] a youth social action group, several former street-involved youth were talking about favourite places to hang out with friends in downtown Victoria. They recalled numerous instances when security guards and police had told them to move from a bench they frequented, claiming it was for "park visitors only." Eventually, the city removed the bench. The surveillance, exclusion and policing in this scenario are encountered regularly by street-involved youth when they are spending time with their friends in Canadian cities. Recalling this and similar events as frustrating and humiliating, one young woman asked: "When are we allowed to be human beings?"

The treatment of this young woman and her friends reflects broader public anxiety and ambivalence about street-involved youth and their peer relationships. Anthropologists and others have noted that street youth are often assumed to be involved in deviant, risky or criminal behaviour (Beazley 2002, 2003; Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005, 58; Bucholtz 2002; Rice 2010; Karabanow 2004). Their social groups are regarded as "gangs," as a threat to public security, and as furthering risks and harm to youth, particularly through drug and alcohol use and violence (Johnson, Whitbeck and Hoyt 2005, 232; Tyler and Melander 2011, 802; McCarthy, Felmlee and Hagan 2004, 808), and as hindering youth from getting off the street. This article resists this negative perception by drawing on research we conducted in Victoria, BC, to understand how street-involved youth conceptualise, talk about and experience their friendships. Building on what youth told us about the meaning and significance of friendship, we discuss how, especially, in the absence and erosion of state and familial support, friendships can mediate some of the harmful aspects of street life. Further, we suggest how marginalised youth create a "relational refuge," that is, a social space constituted through trust, proximity, and sharing

of emotions and resources. Our analytical focus is the relationship among street youth friendships, youth notions of self, and the harsh neoliberal political economy in which these youth are living.

Perspectives on Street Youth Friendships

The tendency to negatively view street-involved youth friendships is rooted in long-standing assumptions about youth and their peer relationships, and is exacerbated by contemporary neoliberal thinking. As Bucholtz (2002, 529) argues, adolescents and teenagers, or "youth" as they are now often called, are strongly associated with a formative "liminal" period of development between childhood and adulthood (see also Lesko 1996). In Canada and the United States, youth are understood as needing freedom during this liminal phase to "experiment" and "discover one's self" at the same time that adults may express considerable anxiety about youth veering too far from socially acceptable behaviour and "failing" to take on adult responsibilities. These social anxieties are heightened in the case of street youth, who are seen as liminal in age and social competency and as "out of place" (Beazley 2003, 182; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998), that is, not at home, not at school and not under appropriate adult supervision or control.

Ambivalence and anxiety about youth are evident in adult conceptualisations of youth friendships, which, since at least the late 1800s, have been regarded as both an essential "natural" aspect of socialisation and development and as a source of potentially harmful "peer pressure" (Tyler and Melander 2011, 802; Lesko 1996). Research on street youth friendship has sometimes privileged this association with risk over the value these friendships may offer.

> Running away and living on the streets profoundly affects adolescent social development. It weakens ties to supervising adults at home and at school, weakens or severs ties to school and neighbourhood friends, and establishes unconventional ties in the street culture. (Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt 2005, 232)
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> Social networks that include other homeless youth are more likely to engender risk because of the high rate of substance use, delinquency, and risky sexual behaviours found among these individuals. (Tyler and Melander 2011, 802)
>
> Of particular concern is that engagement with these problematic peers, primarily other homeless young people, has repeatedly been shown to be associated with increased HIV risk for homeless young people. (Rice 2010, 589)

Certainly, street youth can be influenced negatively by, and even drawn to the street through, their street friendships (Visano 1990). Yet positive and negative aspects of friendships are complex and not reducible to age, social status or domicile status of the parties involved. Negative views of street youth and their relationships obscure the heterogeneous nature of friendships, the biographies of experience and affiliation that youth bring to these relationships, and the value of street-based skills and knowledge (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014; Karabanow 2004, 55; Tyler and Melander 2011, 802; Margaretten 2011, 52; Márquez 1999, 5). Decades ago, child rights activist and researcher Judith Ennew (1994, 410) noted that street children are quite capable of developing "supportive networks, coping strategies and meaningful relationships outside adult supervision and control." Anthropologists and others exploring the diverse affiliations of young people on the street with peers on and off the street (for example, Aptekar 1988; Beazley 2003; Burr 2006; Kovats-Bernat 2006; Stablein 2011; Wolseth 2013) note that the form and characteristics of peer relationships may vary (by child age, gender and location) but that they are "an essential element of [street child and youth] subculture" (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014, 71). In the midst of economic and social precarity, street youth's peer relationships provide resources (for example, food, drugs, cigarettes, information), emotional support, caretaking and protection, mutual acceptance and a sense of belonging (for example, Beazley 2003; Kovats-Bernat 2006; Stablein 2011).

Within the study of street youth, there is some attention to how peer relationships contribute to youth's identity and sense of self. Describing Toronto street youth in the mid-1980s, Visano (1990, 151) argued that these relationships were a critical element in the socialisation of collective identity, that is, in "becoming a street kid." Beazley's (2002, 2003) research furthers this interest in understanding how youth on the street actively negotiate relationships that support their survival and are constitutive and consequential for their identities. Her analysis of *Tikyan*, street boy subculture in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, underscores the value placed on solidarity and mutual assistance within the group (117). Articulating themselves as different from mainstream culture, from domiciled youth and from adults can be a powerful basis for solidarity and identity among street youth (Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014, 71, 96). Our own work has revealed that these negotiations of identity and affiliation can also involve complex entanglements with mainstream symbols and practices often accessed through social media and the ubiquitous cell

phone. While affiliating with a group may offer benefits (Kovats-Bernat 2006), the complexity of street life means youth must learn to balance their "collective identity with other fluid identities … present[ed] for various activities and needs" (Beazley 2003, 122). Further, youth strategies of affiliation and identity formation can highlight their awareness of their social location, as well as local meanings and youth priorities about self (Downe 2001). Beazley (2003, 119) writes about the "pride in independence" within the "pervasive ideology of individualism that permeates all street boy relations [in Yogyakarta]" (see also Visano 1990, 154). Aptekar and Heinonen (2003, 210) suggest that in some contexts, street youth's desire for independence and autonomy can preclude emotional bonding and reciprocity among peers. Dolson's (2015a, 153; 2015b) work explores how street youth in Toronto navigate social assistance and employment programs (for example, workfare) intent on bringing their subjectivities into line with a neoliberal "rhetoric of self-improvement" and "self-management." Notably, his work highlights youth's "practices of partial accommodation and selective resistance" (Dolson 2015a, 118) as they harness the state's resources to their own projects of selfhood.

Our article contributes in three ways to existing work on friendships among street youth. First, we add to the ethnographic corpus by exploring how some Canadian street youth conceptualise and value friendship. Second, we articulate how youth ideas and practices of friendship may bring into focus and mediate the harmful effects of neoliberal social and economic policies at the same time that these policies can bring unwanted scrutiny on youth. Third, we explore how friendship among these street youth in Victoria is expressed within an idiom – "being myself" – that evokes local priorities about individuality, "authenticity" and self-expression. We suggest that "being myself" is not principally an individualism of independence and self-reliance necessitated by the street (Beazley 2003; Visano 1990). Rather, "being myself" as expressed by these youth is fundamentally social, that is, a relational refuge where friends create meaning, find and give support and experience some relief from the challenges of their everyday lives. We argue that friendships are deeply meaningful to these youth, in large part because they are social spaces in which youth are seen and valued as individuals.

Neoliberal Streets

Two decades of neoliberal policy in Canada have increased poverty and eroded social and economic assistance to lower-income families, thereby increasing the chances that youth in vulnerable families end up on the street (McBride and McNutt 2007, 185–190; Little and Marks 2010, 193–194). Social assistance once aimed at protecting individuals from the "unpredictability of the marketplace" has been eroded by neoliberal policies that valorise employment, personal responsibility and hard work (Carrol and Little 2001, 48; Harvey 2011 [2005]; Kelly 2001). What Lazzarato (2012, 30) calls the "morality" of debt versus labour intensifies the surveillance and condemnation of "the unemployed, the 'assisted,' the users of public services." Through the lens of neoliberalism, youth in general may be seen as net debtors – drawing unearned services from society while producing little to nothing in return until they become hardworking adults. In this light, negative perceptions of street youth as lazy, as refusing to grow up and act responsibly, and as failing to "better" themselves through school and hard work intensify (Karabanow et al. 2010, 42). Street-involved youth are regarded as debt creators, as they are typically depicted as loiterers, vandals and thieves (and thus a danger to public and private property), routinely using up services that they "do not deserve" and menacing "legitimate" users of city public spaces.

By 2013, the province of British Columbia had one of the highest rates of poverty in the country, and yet government funding for social services and housing had declined steeply (Amyot 2013, 8). A very high cost of living combined with a low vacancy rate for rental units make the provincial capital, Victoria, one of worst cities in the country for lower-cost affordable housing (Herman 2012, 8; Cleverley 2014). Regressive policies on wages, housing and social support increase the chances that youth in affected households will end up on the street and, once there, face increasing barriers to accessing vital services or transitioning off the street (Karabanow et al. 2010, 41–44). Frontline agencies estimate conservatively that over five hundred youth ages 13–24 in Victoria are "in need of housing" (Irish 2008, 4). According to one of the city's major service agencies, "youth have fallen through the cracks" (Amyot 2013, 18).

Intent on preserving Victoria's reputation as safe, clean and beautiful, a touristic and retirement reward for "successful" lives, the city government implemented until very recently strategies to "clear away the people facing poverty, homelessness and/or drug issues" (Victoria Coalition Against Poverty 2011, 2). Disproportionate ticketing for minor infractions in public spaces (such as trespassing, panhandling and loitering) and other common policing practices make day-to-day life difficult for street populations (Herman 2012, 4–5; O'Connor 2012). Even the physical architecture of the city has

been altered as the city works to "discourage loitering" and "beautify" certain locations by removing or obstructing areas used primarily by homeless populations (Victoria Coalition Against Poverty 2011, 1). In this context, street youth's evident poverty, assumed inactivity and indolence, and sometimes visible consumption of drugs and alcohol heighten the perception that they are not only different, but the antithesis of Victoria's ideal citizen. Anxiety is heightened especially about out-of-school, unemployed youth street sitting and congregating in public places – youth who are seen as delinquent and not transitioning into "responsible" adult citizens.

Methods

As part of a larger multi-year study by one of us, LMM, on how street-involved youth perceive health, body and risk and strategise to take care of themselves, TW conducted a series of interviews on their friendships (Werdal 2013). Recruited opportunistically from the participants in the larger study and from a local youth health clinic, 11 youth were interviewed in late 2012. Each received an honorarium in exchange for their time, knowledge and stories.

In semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour and digitally audio recorded with permission, youth were asked a range of open-ended questions intended to encourage them to talk about friendship in their own terms (James 2007, 262). The first author read, reread, compared, coded and analysed transcribed interviews to identify emerging themes (Bernard and Ryan 1998); a subset of interviews were coded and analysed for validation by the second author. Our analysis focused on metaphors and recurring and similar words, phrases and ideas, as well as points of divergence in how youth talked about friendship. Findings from this research were shared and discussed with the members of MTOS, the youth social action group formed through the larger research project, and have contributed to presentations within and beyond academia. Ethical approval for the research was obtained through our institution. We have used pseudonyms (which youth could choose) throughout and changed identifying information.

Participants identified as "street-involved," that is, as "young people who may or may not be homeless and spend some time in the social and economic world of 'the street'" (Perkins 2009, 37). The interviewed youth included five self-identified men and six self-identified women, 16 to 21 years of age. Some of the youth were from Victoria, but most were from other towns and cities in BC or Canada. Youth reasons for leaving home included family tensions, not liking foster care, preferring friends over family, and the death of their parents. Their housing experiences were diverse; at the time of interview, two youth had government rent subsidies, four had moved back with family, one was living with friends, another with a significant other, and three were living on the streets full time, camping in parks and sleeping in youth shelters. None of the youth had completed high school, although three hoped to do so. At interview, three youth had part-time or casual work, four were receiving some form of government assistance, and the others earned money by selling drugs and panhandling.

What Makes a Good Friend?

Understanding how people envision and conceptualise "friendship" is not always a straightforward matter of asking for definitions. As the interviews made clear, "friend" and "friendship" are social forms more often experienced, witnessed and enacted than articulated verbally. Youth referred to different types of friends – "drinking buddy," "work friend" or "friend from school" – and to intensities of friendship – "good friends," "sort of a friend," "on-off friend." Yet parsing the subtle attributes of different types of friends and the precise nature of friendship as a generalised form of sociality was difficult. Easier to put into words were desired qualities of friends:

> Well, it's basically just like, I'm upset, I can talk to her, she's upset, she can talk to me, you know, like, we don't judge each other, we can open up about anything and like, it just, it's easy, you know? It's not like an awkward friendship. We can joke around, we can whatever. (Elise)
>
> And I think fundamentally, like, a friend should just be someone who accepts you openly and respects you as a person. (Emma)
>
> Those are real friends. People that, you know, they help you along and they don't steal from you, they don't, you know, mislead you or misguide you. You know, stuff like that. Just honesty. Really, that's what it's about: honesty and respect. And honour. (Tommy)

Describing "real" friends in terms of honesty, respect and trustworthiness speaks to a desired and valued openness and transparency between friends, what Killick and Desai (2010, 9) refer to as the "unconstrained sentiment [that] lies at the basis of friendship." Youth underscored the idea that a good friend can be counted on; they are knowable, reliable and consistent, an emphasis that may well point to qualities missing in other relationships in their lives. The emphasis youth placed on respect and

honesty in their friendships meant sometimes even close relationships had to be ended when those elements were broken or lost (Amit-Talai, 1995).

Assumptions about gender shaped friendships in a variety of ways. Some youth suggested that "girls" were generally better communicators and more "understanding" – both highly desirable traits in friendships (Winkler-Reid, 2015). While Matt talked about how his male friends could help him get high if he was "hurting," he also talked about how "guys" needed a "solid girl" who could keep them "clean." Not everyone viewed young women as positively: Anna felt that they were too preoccupied with their appearance and shopping; Ryan preferred his "guy friends," who like to joke and goof around, while girls "gossip" and "talk too much shit." Some young women felt that friendships with men could offer them protection from violence or from other men making unwanted sexual advances. Young women also suggested that "guy–girl" friendships were less prone to emotional flare-ups and conflicts, or what youth called "drama."

> I don't have lot of women friends bec – I prefer not to hang out with girls, um, I just don't like how a lot of them act. They, they start rumours, they're just evil to each other, backstab each other, they're manipulative and … like boys, if they have a problem with each other they deck it out, have a brawl or something and that's that. With girls they keep things going, try and ruin each other's lives. It's not something I'm interested in, all the drama and everything like that. (Anna)

> I've had I think more friendships with girls but they always like, end. But like with guy friends I find it's just – we like stay friends longer 'cause we don't get into like stupid fights like girls do. (Jen)

For the young men who identified as heterosexual, "guy–girl" friendships were seen as desirable but fraught with potential complications. Ryan felt he had to act differently with friends who were girls, lest his attention or casual physical contact be misconstrued as a sexual advance. Tommy held similar concerns, but naturalised the potential for sexual attraction as a "guy thing."

> Yeah, for sure, I, I, I have lots of good friends that are girls that I'm, the only relationships we're in is a friendship, you know? But it always, I don't know, it, it, it, the guy always wishes that it goes, that it would go further. But that's just a guy thing, you know? Guys always want to get in the pants, right? [*Laughs*] You know, at least at this age, I don't know.

Evans (2010) observes that among domiciled boys in southeast London, friendships can signal both qualities admired and desired in the here and now and in the hoped-for future. Some youth we interviewed changed their friendship networks to "move on" and leave behind troublesome associations with school or home (Stablein 2011), or behaviours such as partying and drinking. Dave commented: "I've, like, filtered out a lot of my friends, just like, I've just stopped talking to them just 'cause they're not the kind of people I want to be with anymore."

Addiction and heavy drug use, in particular, were seen to make friendships more complicated, even impossible to maintain:

> We kind of just, we're all pushing each other away for our addiction almost. Like it's getting, it's gotten to that point. Like you push friends and family away for your addiction, but it, our addiction brings us closer. And then it could al – also just like bring us at each other's necks. It's both ways. (Matt)

Friendship was not something to take for granted; the value of having friends in the harsh context of street life was noted especially by youth who expressed difficulties in forming these relationships. Particularly valuable were the friends with whom youth felt they had a "connection."

> With strong friendship there's more of a connection, and I think a person should stand by you and be supportive of you, but to just be a friend, I think, a real friend, um, just the, the respect and just the, the support, I think. (Emma)

Spatial metaphors of "connection" and "close" are used widely among Canadians to describe and assess their friendships (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider 2013). Indeed, as Winkler-Reid (2015, 167) points out, physical and emotional closeness have long been idealised characteristics of friendship in Western European–descended populations. Among these youth, closeness and connection highlight hard-to-put-into-words aspects of friendship – the sustaining emotional bonds, the unspoken trust, respect and acceptance, and in some cases the physicality of friendship, as well as the ways in which youth share in each other's experience while retaining their individuality:

> I've known her for probably like four years now maybe? Something like that. I don't know, we've just always been like, connected. Just like we get each other. (Dave)

These friendships were often rooted in a history of shared experiences and continuing loyalty and acceptance despite trying circumstances. As reported elsewhere (Burr 2006; Kovats-Bernat 2006), especially strong friendships were expressed through kinship ties; nearly all of the street youth had friends they referred to as "brothers" or "sisters."

While emotional connection and physical companionship were desired deeply, youth emphasised that sex could "ruin" a friendship.

> My friend Michael, we were like really, really close and like, we both like, really liked each other, but we didn't want to ruin our friendship. (Jen)
>
> Also it's like, for me, I can't get as close to a guy as I can to a girl because in my opinion guys can't really be friends with girls or vice versa because it just turns into "oh I'm in love with you," you know? So I kind of, I keep my distance from guys like that, just 'cause – like with Robert I don't, I try not to get too close to him just 'cause, like, I don't want him to all the sudden have a crush on me or something, you know? 'Cause it just ruins the relationship. (Elise)

Paul, who is bisexual, expressed somewhat different tensions around friendship and sexuality.

> I get along well with girls, because like, I don't know, it's just, they understand better, I guess? I don't know. I … I've never been able to pinpoint the reason. But like, I think it's more of, guys are just, like, guys are more prone to be homophobic than girls are, because girls are like, "Oh, I can have a gay best friend," and they're so stoked and guys are like, "Ew, gays." And there's a lot of guys who I am friends with, but I'm definitely friends with a lot more girls.

Youth framed and defined friendships in a variety of ways to manage how those relationships appeared to others, particularly to romantic partners. For example, referring to other youth with fictive kin terms, "brothers" and "sisters," highlighted closeness, but also worked to desexualise the relationship.

Two broad categories of what Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010, 441) call "help" or acts of "cooperation, mutuality [and] reciprocity" were identified by youth as especially compelling evidence of close friendships – sharing resources and looking out for each other. Sharing resources covered a range of practices (lending, exchanging, giving, buying) and resources (money, cigarettes, alcohol, food, drugs, advice) similar to those of street youth in other contexts (Beazley 2003; Burr 2006; Kovats-Bernat 2006).

> [A good friend is someone who helps] you out when you have nothing. Not a roof over your head. Lending you bus fare and like, uh, giving you one out of your two smokes that you have left, you know. (Matt)

Helping friends also included caring about each other's well-being, including physical health and emotional state.

> They take care of me as if I was their family and stuff like that. Look out for each other. Help each other out with things that they need. Help each other through hard times … Like, whenever I'm sick, my friends always try and get me to go up to my parent's place or go to a friend's place that's inside and stuff. Make sure that I'm resting as much as possible and stuff. Make sure I'm eating properly. And go to the doctor's even if they're being stubborn, they don't want to go … (Anna)
>
> We actually keep an eye on each other, not as much as we should be, 'cause my, my buddy is started getting back into hitting the needles. And he's just haggard as hell. (Matt)

Helping also included protection, that is, watching out for friends who were incapacitated, guarding possessions, physically defending one another and urging friends to leave dangerous situations.

> You could always trust me to, you know, watch your back, right? I don't know, sometimes, I like, there's, there is this one lady friend I have, her name is Wendy. And yeah, sometimes she goes on a nod [substance-induced dozing] and you know I'll sit with her, and I'll watch her, you know, I'll make sure nobody sits beside her and steals her things, right? (Ashley)
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> If, like, say … a bunch of people were after me or something and I ran up to my buddy's place or, you know, seeing a couple buddies on the street, I wouldn't even have to lift a finger, I'd just be like, "Yo, those guys are beefing," right? And "I don't know why" and, they would, they would, they would stand right behind me, you know? (Tommy)

Connection among friends, especially close friends, was expressed often through bodily metaphors. Friends "keep an eye out," "have my back" and "stand up for me." Friendship, through qualities of honesty, trust and acceptance and through acts of sharing and protection, bolsters youth security by keeping individuals connected to each other, to sustaining activities and to the basic necessities of survival – eating, seeking medical help, not getting too far into hard drugs. Friendship enables a connection to a desirable social world and to survival.

In contrast, the ways youth describe the absence of friends is strikingly different.

> Oh it'd … be horrible. I don't know what I'd do. It would be like, like the worst thing ever, I would be so alone … I can't even imagine. I'd probably get like so depressed and, like, be put in a psych ward, I don't know. (Elise)

> Horrible. That's how you end up completely lost. And alone and not knowing what to do, and doing drugs and not having friends to pull you other – out of it. That's how you die … You can't live without friends. (Jane)

> I'd probably end up going crazy if I had to be homeless with no friends. Because 99 per cent of the time my friends and the people who, you know, helped me out, or I help out and like, you know, I got your back, you got mine sort of thing, you know, if you don't have that then you're kind of, you're all on your own. And if you're all on your own then, you're fucked. (Ryan)

In sum, the ways in which street-involved youth talk about friendship and its attributes, practices and value in their lives frequently reference forms of connection and proximity. Friends are like extensions of themselves, taking care of them, offering help, listening, sharing resources such as food and cigarettes, and ensuring that they are okay. "Close" friends are those who not only know them well, but who respect them and offer their support unconditionally. Finkelstein (2005, 40) notes that "street kids are often thought of as living in disorganized misery, where they are characterized as psychologically damaged, unable to form relationships, and destined for social, emotional, and economic failure." To the contrary, youth narratives point to their skills in creating, negotiating and navigating their friendships under difficult circumstances and in ways that can be effective (and often essential) survival strategies (Finkelstein 2005, 40; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010; Margaretten 2011).

Being Surveilled and Being Seen

In this section, we have two goals in developing our analysis of youth narratives on friendship. First, we highlight how some practices of friendship among street-involved youth may mediate the harmful effects of neoliberal social and economic policies at the same time that these policies may focus attention on street youth as in need of control. Second, we then explore how among these street youth in Victoria, BC, friendship is expressed within a particular idiom – "being myself" – that we argue reproduces both dominant cultural priorities about self-expression and neoliberalism's focus on individualism while at the same time using this widespread idea in a distinct, situational and intimate way.

In the context of neoliberal retrenchment of social supports, friendships are vital to the well-being of street-involved youth. The generalised reciprocity and sharing of material, emotional and informational resources that youth associate with their friendships help to mitigate some of the gaps in street and youth services. Friendship provides or bolsters support and assistance that might be accessed elsewhere, but come from trusted allies who care about each other. Thus, help accessed through friendship can contrast sharply with the brief, impersonal interactions that characterise the labyrinth of appointments, forms and assessments required to prove youth are "deserving" of social help, skills training or others forms of assistance (Dolson 2015a). Having trusted companions to watch your belongings, wake you up, and encourage you also enables some youth to hold down part-time jobs or keep appointments that allow them to gain access to resources. Hanging out with friends offers companionship, comfort and protection to youth and a means of passing the time that is free and often deeply pleasurable (Mitchell and Selfridge 2017). Our interviews confirm Karabanow and colleagues' (2010) observation about the significance of youth gathering, often at the end of the day, to pool resources, feed animals, exchange information, keep track of one another, and rest. In sum, friendship offers what Emily Margaretten (2011, 45) terms "the everyday ties of social belonging … that make street survival a meaningful possibility for youth" and that offer them "assistance, generosity and camaraderie" (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010, 446; see also Kovats-Bernat 2006, 118).

At the same time, friendships among street-involved youth can serve to heighten their vulnerability to surveillance and control. Researchers have noted that youth on the street are widely regarded as "out of place," that is, not at home or in school, and thus are "committing a social violation, by transgressing that which is considered to be appropriate behaviour" (Beazley 2002, 1666). This transgression makes youth visible to city authorities as vagrants and deviants, creating a situation in which youth must be policed. As public spaces to gather, rest and share have been transformed into spaces for aesthetic and economic consumption, youth's opportunities to "hang out" without interference by police and public are diminished at the same time that their need to collaborate, share and associate have become all the more vital to their well-being. Further, the very forms

of sociality that youth engage in, enjoy and depend upon are problematised, even warranting police attention. In Toronto, for example,

> this can be seen in the percentage of participants who received tickets for drinking in public (23%), hanging out with friends in a public place (21%), sitting in the park (14%), using drugs in public (13%) and sitting on a sidewalk (8%). Several of these tickets were also a result of the survival strategies of these young people, such as choosing to sleep in a public place (10%), which is often done for protection, and earning money through panhandling or squeegeeing (10%). (O'Grady, Gaetz, Buccieri 2013, 345)

There is no comparable study from Victoria, but street-involved youth and front-line workers told us such policing is common. The policing of the very affiliations that are critically important in street-involved youth's daily survival is troubling. As recounted in the anecdote that opens this article, when a group of friends were observed in their favourite park, all that was "seen" was their visible street involvement and congregation in a public space rather than any help, caring or support or other "adaptive advantages" (Finkelstein 2005, 36). In contrast, a group of well-dressed seniors or tourists would not trigger similar anxiety about "improper" behaviour or citizenship. As Finkelstein (2005) suggests, because street youth groups are seen as inherently problematic, the fact that street youth's associations may help mitigate conflict, may provide the shared monies from one youth's part-time job, or may ensure youth get help if they are sick, injured or overdosing is invisible.

> Arguably, policing these friendships may indicate some recognition of their importance to street populations. Karabanow and colleagues (2010, 51) regard street-involved group dynamics as distinctly un-neoliberal (and in fact un-capitalist) in nature:
>
> In some ways, youth participants characterized their culture as "collective"; people use their gifts or talents to make money throughout the day, and when they are done they return to an agreed upon location and determine what they can do with the money they have acquired. Sometimes individuals work for themselves, but "crews" often pool their resources to ensure that everyone (dogs included) is fed, watered, and taken care of (e.g., has necessary medical supplies, able to get new footwear, etc.).

Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010, 446) note that friendships make it possible "for the urban poor to live and survive under particular market forms … as the poor are forced to create new ways of living in the face of decimated opportunities" (see also Beazley 2003). Essential are "the collective forms that street living can take and the relations of cooperation and reciprocity that are commonly, indeed necessarily, involved" (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010, 442). These collective forms loom large in our findings where youth recounted sharing emotional and material support, the value of helping others, and the comfort in knowing others would look after them:

> But, like, when you have friends you like camp out together and like, you have fun and you got each other's backs, like if you need something they'll be like, "Oh, I have this," or like, if you don't have like food or anything and they do, they will give you some. (Jen)
>
> It, like, when I'm hurting, my friends always manage to come up with something … either food or marijuana, or it's alcohol or a gaming system we can all game at or watch TV, have a conversation to start with, I don't know. At times we, yeah, you can't really – yeah. We all help each other out. We ride together, we die together. We get high together, we drink together. What's mine is yours. (Matt)
>
> Um, if they're having a bad day and they need a cigarette, I'd give them cigarettes or buy them something to eat if they're hungry, um, really depending on the situation and stuff, I'll try and do as much as I possibly can to help … 'Cause like I know what I need to survive and stuff like that, like be healthy and safe and everything like that. And so, if I've got more than I need and I can help somebody else then I'd love to do that, than keep it for myself. (Anna)

Our research also makes clear that youth friendship practices include and enable strategies for youth well-being that are not merely functional but often deeply satisfying and pleasurable to youth. Friendship is about more than just ensuring each other's survival; there is also a desire to be helpful for the sake of making each other's lives better. As Emma put it, "I look out for people a lot. I'm very compassionate and I try to be very empathetic. And I like to help people and I like the positive outcome. I like seeing people happy." Being a good friend and helping friends be happy can give some youth a deep sense of mastery, of social worth and of being cared for and cared about, as well as encouraging them to form meaningful social ties and be responsible for others. Not only do friendships provide emotionally sustaining relationships that may not otherwise be available to them, but being a good friend can be a source of pride, status and social recognition.

In contrast to the neoliberal preoccupation with blaming citizens who are impoverished or reliant on

state assistance, youth did not express concern about why a friend was without resources or needing support, nor was there much moralising about how a friend had chosen to use their resources. Such gifting and sharing can be understood to be an alternative economic system nested within the larger capitalist system in which youth live. Whenever they could, youth hoped to help friends with the effects of poverty and the harm of being dispossessed.

> I don't know, whenever, like, me and Ryan have money 'cause she, she is in [a job skills program], but her money always goes like that [*snaps fingers*], and me and Ryan both have a source of income so, we have a little bit more money than her. So if she's hungry or something we'll buy her food, or we'll buy her a pack of smokes or like, just help her out, you know? (Elise)

In his analysis of alternate systems of exchange, Mauss (2011 [1954]) disputes the widespread belief that economies have always existed on the premise of value exchange (such as barter economies). As Graeber (2004, 21) explains:

> Mauss demonstrated that in fact, such economies were really "gift economies." They were not based on calculation, but on a refusal to calculate; they were rooted in an ethical system which consciously rejected most of what we would consider the basic principles of economics.

Youth in our study echoed this belief, expressing the view that gifting was not a necessary obligation or required transaction of friendship:

> I don't have to try to keep these people around, like, they're my friends because they're my friends. I don't have to like, be like, "Oh my god have this! Oh my god have this! Like, take this! Have this!" because I want you to stick around. It's like, no, we can just sit there and hang out and do stupid things and we will laugh and that's what will make us friends, not me, like, giving away things and all that kind of stuff. (Paul)

For some, friendship and a lack of material abundance were intertwined: friendship was not dependent on possessions and purchasing but on sharing meagre resources. This is not to suggest that youth never keep track of who is sharing and who isn't (in fact they do). As long as you are contributing and not hoarding or hiding resources from others, that is enough. Nor do youth share without expectation of return sharing, but they do not keep accounts with their friends until it is evident that the flow of resources is decidedly one-sided. Friendship is a relationship in which help, protection, resource acquisition and emotional support may exist free of outright tally, obligation or cost. More importantly, the resources that friendship offers youth are available without them having to prove that they are deserving. Equally significant, as we explore further in the next section, friendship is embedded in ideas about self that emphasise sociality and relationality rather than autonomy.

"Being Myself": A Relational Refuge on the Street

As we've argued above, friendships can mediate some of the harmful aspects of street life by enabling collective forms and practices of generalised reciprocity and mutual acceptance. However, we are not arguing that these collective forms are without limits. In fact, some youth were quick to point out that they did not "give to friends" but rather "shared with friends," an important distinction:

> I share it. I never give it away. I don't, I can't afford it. I'm a very cheap human being. (Jane)

> I won't give absolutely everything I have, I'll make sure that I'm okay, but other than that, anything that I can do for my friends and stuff I will. (Anna)

Nor are we suggesting that youth's attraction to and engagement in communal forms of life entails their rejection of independence, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism, long valued as markers of adulthood among many Canadians and now intensified through neoliberal criteria for social assistance and youth programs in job skills and renter readiness (Dolson 2015a). To the contrary, youth participants generally aspire to "get out of [ministry] care" or "off [social] assistance" and find a job that will enable them find "a place of my own" (see also Klodawsky, Aubry, and Farrell 2006). We argue that what is especially valued by youth on the street is the relationality of their desired subjectivity. Specifically, we argue that friendships may offer some street-involved youth a vital relational space that they describe as "being myself."

This idiom of "being myself" has historical roots in Western Europe and remains a widespread expression of an ideal element in friendship in descendant populations (Winkler-Reid 2015). Our research highlights how friendships that enable one to "be oneself" are not only deeply desired among street youth, but take on a particular resonance among this group, who are often judged and found wanting. When youth talked about being

themselves, they were not discussing their specific identities of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity or status. Instead, youth referenced the role of friendship in enabling something they valued deeply – a sense of freedom, safety and acceptance in making their own selves visible in a way that they found meaningful and fulfilling. "Being myself" draws attention to how youth envision themselves rather than to what others expect or desire of them. In this respect, we see evidence of cultural and generational priorities for a self that is "authentic" and individually distinctive or "unique." At the same time, this "true" and distinctive self is deeply relational.

> I'm like, when people first meet m – meet me, I'm like really quiet and like keep to myself and like one, once they're, like, my friend and, like, we hang out a lot and, like, I get comfortable around them, then I start acting like myself. Really random and weird … Like, once you get comfortable and, like, I guess the funny side comes out. (Jen)

> When I think of something positive, then it's just, like, being able to share everything, being able to share, like, being comfortable with a person enough that they can see all sides of you, and you're comfortable and you're okay with it. Um, just the, yeah, basically comfort and openness with a person. I think that the stronger your – the friendship, the more open you are. (Emma)

The ties between friendship and the freedom to express oneself without restraint or judgment was echoed by others. For instance, Dave defined a friend as "someone I can just, like, be completely myself with and just like, flowing conversations or – don't even have to – the conversation doesn't even have to flow or – um, I don't know. I don't know how to describe it, it's just, like, a friend." He elaborated on what it meant to "be himself" by saying, "To be comfortable and just not really care what comes out of your mouth, and just, just to be."

"Being myself" is not principally about being autonomous or independent, nor does it privilege self-interest or being able to "do whatever I want." To the contrary, "being myself" is not a solitary achievement, but a relational process occurring only with and through friendships. The ability to receive support, to unmask one's feelings and to feel comfortable enough to be oneself without fear of reprisal are deeply important to youth. A close friend makes one knowable, allowing visibility through familiarity, mutual acceptance and a sense of being connected to one another. For these youth, "being myself" requires someone who can see them. The feeling of freedom and acceptance that youth receive when they are seen, acknowledged and accepted in their friendships contrasts sharply with their descriptions of not being accepted at home or at school and being punished for not conforming or not meeting social expectations of "changing," "improving," "employing" and "controlling" the self. The idea of "being myself" exposes how much damage youth may endure when they are condemned, ignored or chastised, or the object of ridicule by passersby while they congregate, work or relax in public places. "Being myself" is possible only with others that one trusts and knows well:

> Well, being myself around friends just shows that like, they're not judgmental, you know? 'Cause I am kind of crazy all over the place. And someone who can put up with that is probably a good friend, you know? Like, I don't know. Yeah, I know if someone doesn't like me for who I am and wants me to change, I just tell them to get out my life. Like, it's really not worth it. (Elise)

In her work in Indonesia, Beazley (2003, 182) argues that "[street] children … have developed 'geographies of resistance' to survive," including "the appropriation of 'urban niches' within the city, in which they can earn money, feel safe and survive." Similarly, marginalised street-involved youth in Victoria have become experts in navigating, negotiating and developing friendships as a metaphorical geography of resistance, one that lies beyond the reach of the city, government and adults, all of whom may look to discount or delegitimise such relationships. We suggest further that the Canadian youth we interviewed create a "relational refuge," that is, a social space constituted through trust, proximity, and sharing of emotions and resources. The importance, meaning and sustaining nature of this relational space are suggested by one of our participants, Jen, when she says, "When you're homeless your friends are like your home." Within this space, youth feel connections to others, seen and cared for, and safe enough to be themselves.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested that in the face of neoliberal processes deployed to control or discredit street-involved youth, their friendships can act to resist and alleviate these processes by offering protection, help, care and meaning. Friendships are a metaphorical home for marginalised youth who spend much of their time without access to, or outside of, homes and families. Even as the state works to remove more social supports and blame youth for the difficulties they face in everyday life, some youth are able to construct a "home"

in which meaning and acceptance are still available to them. Further, friendship – or at least some street-involved youths' friendships – may act as an important counterbalance to expectations of autonomy, performance and self-regulation so often sanctioned in neoliberal processes. While the opportunity to "be oneself" within and through friendships was deeply valued and sustaining among the youth we interviewed, other ways of "being oneself" exist. Dolson's (2015b) analysis of one young man in Toronto reminds us that some youth, perhaps especially street-entrenched youth, may find solace and security through retreat and self-isolation.

By highlighting the positive aspects of youth friendships, we hope to open the way for creative approaches that support such associations as another way to encourage street youth's well-being. In this endeavour, we are mindful of Kovats-Bernat's advice (2006, 211) that

> if anthropology is to offer anything of substance to the global discourse on the rights of children and the difficulties under which many of them are living, then it must be willing to adopt a preferential approach to the study of the specific conditions under which children are nurtured and protected, rather than abused, battered and exposed.

Rather than looking elsewhere to find "specific conditions" of nurture and protection for street-involved youth in Victoria, our research posits that these resources are present to some extent within the very relationships that have been suggested as sources of harm. The importance of friendships among street-involved youth underscores the need for places and initiatives that support those friendships and what they can offer.

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1 More Than One Street gave permission to use their name for this article.

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