

Territorial Stigmatization: A DTES Perspective



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“You start by using once, and nobody thinks much of it; the top of the spiral. Fueled by the gravity of addiction, eventually you will be kicked out of your home, [and] with no one to turn to, you [will] find yourself mixed up in the Downtown Eastside (DTES): (...) the ‘last stop’ ”

- Omar’s (current DTES resident) view on drug use and addiction from Bumpin’s story, [“A Way up the Spiral”](#).

In his studies regarding the social stigmatization of drugs, professor of sociology, Joseph W. Schneider remarks that it is not the composition or use of drugs that separate the “reputable [drugs]” from the “disreputable [drugs]”. Rather, it is the social status of its user. In Vancouver, Schneiders observation is one that rings true: While the banker snorts his cocaine at the Trump high-rise on West Georgia street unbothered, the injecting drug user (IDU) of the DTES experiences daily prejudice, rooted in not only his drug abuse, but also the territorial stigmatization of the DTES area and its people. With this in mind, one may, as our



volunteer Tyler did, question how the result of similar decisions “no less valuable or thought out” relating to the use of drugs continue under such different circumstances (Tyler: [A](#)

[Volunteer with a Vision](#)). For those who end up in the DTES, the outcome is nevertheless the same. As they find themselves trapped in ‘the spiral’, they become one with the alleyways of the DTES. Transformed from a human to a statistic, seen by bypassers, if at all, only through looks of pity and disgust. This is where the importance of volunteers, such as those of Bumpin Bakery, come in. Their work provide encouragement for people such as Omar, trying to find a way back up the spiral by connecting the city and its members through mutual respect and understanding with the ultimate hope of reducing territorial stigmatization.

What is territorial stigmatization?

Territorial stigmatization is defined as a form of “social discredit” produced by popular media, politicians and other members of society. Through territorial stigmatization, the residents of an area are framed as separate entities and often excluded from the collective city identity (Wacquant, Slater og Borges Pereira 1272). Rather than establish an



acquaintance with, the readers of popular media are bombarded with a *knowledge about* the DTES - models and research that measure outcome rather than cause. Volunteers understand the harm this separation can cause, Owen from Bumpin Bakery’s first experience of the DTES coming from glancing out a bus window to a group of people that he felt were “part of

a culture distant yet so close to home.” ([Owen’s Inspiration and POV](#)). Once he started volunteering, though, he “[became] acquainted with regulars [at the handouts] through unique interactions”, which “resulted in the formation of friendships and bonds” - something one may believe impossible or even dangerous should one only read the news.

Media representation of the DTES shows that 56% of news articles published between 1996 and 2008 hold a generally “negative view” of the area and its inhabitants (Nicholas Blomley 123). Further, 94% of the articles portray the DTES as a medical problem related to substance abuse (Nicholas Blomley 124). This preconceived, negative view is crucial as it influences policy making, research and general attitudes towards the DTES community. Tyler, a Bumpin volunteer, recognizes the general attitude of negativity as he recalls how he used to fear the DTES. He believed that its residents’ “only interest seemed to be (...) yelling and pointing guns at each other.” ([Tyler: A Volunteer with a Vision](#)). When something bad



would happen at the DTES, Tyler’s *knowledge about* led him to a shrug: “the DTES is a

‘rough’ area”. Like Owen, though, Tyler has through his volunteering experience become *acquainted with* another side of the DTES and its residents whom he now describes as “responsive, caring, observant, and down to earth... among many other positive traits”.

Tyler's story stands as an example of the effect *knowledge about* the DTES may have on the perception of the DTES amongst individuals. However, the territorial stigmatization pure *knowledge about* the DTES causes is of importance in the grand scheme. Like Tylers shrug, territorial stigmatization leaves room for hasty conclusions regarding non-drug related issues. For instance, the occurrence of mental illness amongst residents of the DTES has been



reported as “extremely high”: From 2008 to 2011, nearly *half* of all emergency calls made from the DTES to the Vancouver Police Department were related to mental illness. (Aube Linden, Y. Mar og R. Werker 261) Nevertheless, research on mental illness in the DTES remains limited. Out of a total of 99 publications found on the subject of the DTES, only two

articles were observed to discuss mental illness. As with the popular media, the majority of studies regarding the DTES neglect a more critical exploration of the area’s social dynamics - its *how’s* and *why’s* - by an overwhelming focus on issues purley related to drugs (p.564).

Do opioid drugs fuel opioid addiction?

In 2016, opioids claimed the lives of 995 people in British Columbia; enough for the BC Government to declare the situation a “public health emergency” (City of Vancouver). An



estimated 42% of BC’s drug-injecting population inhabit the DTES area (A. Andersen og Boyd 72). With nearly half the IDU population of a 944 000km² province concentrated around a couple of blocks, the DTES and its residents have become synonymous with crime, drugs, and disease (Statistics Canada) (Nicholas Blomley 126). Just how exaggerated the relationship between the DTES and crime has become can be understood through an

anecdote homeless DTES resident Greg relayed about a group he saw, “consisting of four or five men, (...) quite muscular and tall. One of the men was telling the others in the group

never to go down East Hastings, since it is a highly dangerous area, even though the men, especially in a group that size, were very capable of defending themselves in most situations.”([Greg: A Life Story](#)) To Greg, the episode exemplified the stereotypes of the Downtown Eastside and how they have become ingrained and blown out of proportion due to years of societal stigma. In reality, the Downtown Eastside is safe during the day, especially in a group of people.

A similar misconception of ‘danger’ is held against people suffering from addiction. From lack of self-control to weak moral judgement, addiction is commonly perceived as a reflection of character. The burden of the addiction is thus solely placed on the individual, and does not account for other factors, such as life circumstances or social frameworks. However, these factors provide crucial contributions and explanations to the root of addiction. With direct reference to the opioid crisis in North-America, neuroscientist Rachel Wurzman explains how long-term use of heroin reduces the brain’s ability to feel intimate human connection (Wurzman). In lieu of social relationships, heroin is used to relieve the brain’s “hunger”; an easy ‘fix’ to temporarily trigger the release of the hormones that fuel the brain’s social-rewards system (09:22). Omar, a current DTES resident, agrees to the importance of having a social network, especially when considering somebody who is stuck in the aforementioned ‘spiral’ of addiction. “The more you use, the more your connections with family, friends and, ultimately the community, begin to crumble and drift away as you keep spiralling downwards, [until] your community push[es] you away altogether; cutting all ties with you as the lying and stealing become too much.” ([A Way up the Spiral](#))

Arriving at the DTES or ‘the last stop’, is for many the wake-up call in which they realize they need to face their demons if they ever want to escape. For many, the challenge of navigating out of the spiral is difficult and often faced alone. In the words of Omar, “it is our

responsibility as a community to support these people's efforts. (...) The amount of people who influenced your own life, made you the individual inseparable from your name, did it for no benefit other than your well-being. It is time to pass on everything you gained from them, by recognizing those who need help (...)." Albeit small, genuine interaction and human connection may just be the gentle pat that keeps someone going.

How can we change the narrative from *knowledge about* to *acquaintance with*?

The central role of structural forces to the current opioid crisis of the DTES offers a solution; to replace the city's barren *knowledge about* with one that is based on *acquaintance with*. Building the self within the city through inclusion, responsibility and trust have been shown to produce a positive ripple-effect in the fight against social stigma experienced by



IDUs through territorial stigmatization. An example of this can be found in Norway's capital, Oslo, where marketing students in 2005 set out to produce their own magazine, =Oslo. Sold and distributed exclusively by the city's homeless and drug addicted, the magazine offers the

opportunity of a stable and meaningful work environment. Through =Oslo, they are given their own personal badge, trusted to handle money unsupervised, and free to engage in conversation with their potential customers, the citizens of Oslo. Moreover =Oslo gives its workers the opportunity to feel like a seen, respected and productive member of society (=Oslo). Rather than produce *knowledge about*, =Oslo stands as an example of *acquaintance with*. It works. Similar concepts in larger cities such as New York (*Street News*), Toronto (*Spare Change*) and Paris (*La Rue*) have proven to aid communities through meaningful employment (Howley 279) . Two years after its inception, 75 of the vendors working for *Street News* were able to use funds gained through their job to move off the streets (Jacobs). Acts of kindness, such as coffee, baked goods and genuine conversation may seem small, but in the grand scheme we hope they help provide a warmth beyond the physical.



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