‘There Is No Strength in Emotions’: The Role of Street Enculturation in Influencing How Victimized Homeless Women Speak About Violence

Abstract:

This paper is based on analysis of 76 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with homeless women in Los Angeles. What is revealed are three patterns of street enculturation – ‘low-’, ‘medium-’ and ‘high street’ – which are linked to attitudes women professed to hold about violence. In essence, the degree to which a woman had adopted a ‘street orientation’ is seen to influence how she spoke of violence during earlier portions of the interview. However, several ‘medium-’ and ‘high street’ women subsequently acknowledged (directly or indirectly) they were ‘fronting’ for the interviewer in order to preserve a tough façade. When they opened up about their real feelings, the extent to which they had internalized the trauma of violence was revealed. Implications of these findings are explored.

Rikki has been homeless for a year and a half. For the past two months, she has been residing in a temporary shelter in Los Angeles’ Skid Row district, and it is at this shelter that she is being interviewed for a study on trauma and resiliency in the lives of homeless women. In the course of answering the interviewer’s questions, she reveals a life of violent victimization that includes physical and sexual abuse in childhood, physical assaults, domestic violence and an attempted sexual assault in adulthood. Although she has held conventional employment, and has not lived long on the streets relative to other women in her shelter, the 50 year old woman reveals a street-wise attitude when asked about her social network: “I don’t have friends, I have acquaintances. I don’t have friends, because nobody is trustworthy.” When asked if she sees herself as a strong person, she replies, “I think there’s things you do because you have children and you have to do them.” When asked to elaborate, she adds, “I was married for 15 years to a man who beat me until I shot him. I just put a bullet in him [laughs].”

Over the course of conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with women using the services of homeless shelters or transitional housing in the County of Los Angeles, a significant number of study participants reported having been violently victimized as adults, and spoke of

their attempts to cope with the aftermath of violence. In doing so, seventy-six of these participants also displayed varying attitudes towards violence – the violence they had experienced as victims, the violence they witnessed living on the street, and/or the violence some had themselves engaged in against others. Understanding the representation of these attitudes, and their social meaning, is the goal of the present study.

Analysis of the seventy-six (n=76) interviews reveals three patterns of street enculturation among participants that are termed here 'low street', 'medium street' and 'high street.' In analyzing these patterns it was found that the degree to which a woman had adopted a 'street orientation' – that is the culturally rooted values, beliefs, attitudes and postures typically associated with street subcultures – was associated with how she spoke of violence during earlier phases of the interview. To illustrate, 'low street' women often presented themselves as being nonviolent and spoke of abhorring the violence they saw on the street. By way of contrast, 'high street' evinced a tough demeanour, casually referring to both the violence they had experienced, as well as the violence some had perpetrated against others. 'Medium street women' varied in their expressed attitudes toward violence: some evinced dislike and/or disgust of violent behaviours; others presented tough personas and demonstrated street-wise attitudes toward the use of violence.

The relationship between street enculturation and attitudes toward violence is not, however, so simple or so straightforward. Not only was there some variability in attitudes towards violence expressed by women in different enculturation groups, but in later phases of the interview, several of the 'medium-' and 'high street' women revealed they were 'fronting' for the interviewer. In other words, when they initially spoke of violence, they do so in a casual, dismissive way in order to preserve the tough façade that is a constituent element of one's street

persona. However, when the majority began to open up about their real feelings later in the interview, the extent to which they had internalized the trauma of violence became evident. The implications of these findings for both research and social work practises with members of this group are explored in the paper's concluding section.

The Street

'The street' is both a physical space and a subculture. Within the sociological literature, the term has been used to refer to impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods within which a particular set of values is seen to predominate. These values are embedded within an informal set of prescriptive norms for regulating residents' conduct, norms employed in order to reduce the threat of violence (Jacobs and Wright 1999; Anderson 1999). According to Elijah Anderson (1999), the key elements of the 'code of the street' are *independence*, *toughness* and *violence*, each of which is sought in pursuit of the larger cultural goal of achieving social capital in the form of *respect* (see also Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins 2006). Respect is highly privileged within street communities because it is used to stave off others' attempts at violently challenging for status and group domination. To achieve respect, one must campaign for it by developing a reputation for physical and mental toughness, as evidenced by a lack of fear of violence and the willingness to use violence as a means of proactively preventing victimization (Anderson 1994, 1999). Failing to respond to even the most minor of slights – whether real or perceived – can mark one as an appropriate target for victimization (Mullins, Wright and Jacobs 2004). Thus, individuals who live the Code fight for self-preservation and/or *front* – that is, enact "tough, disaffected presentations of self" with the hope of staving off would-be challengers (Froyum 2013: 39).

To the extent that the street and its value set embody a form of hegemonic masculinity that privileges ritualized displays of masculine toughness and violence (Anderson 1999; Dance 2002; Messerschmidt 2000; Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins 2006), it represents "the quintessential male space" (Wardhaugh (1999: 104). So, how do women exist within such spaces? Anderson (1999), writing of the young women encountered in the inner-city of Philadelphia, paints a portrait of male domination and female subordination within which females accrue respect through their attachment to males and/or through bearing children. Anderson is hardly alone in this view: the fact of female oppression within street cultures has been supported by research on street norms conducted by other scholars (Maher and Daly 1997; Maher, Dunlap, Johsnon et al. 1996; Miller 1998, 2001; Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins 2006). Further, the extent to which this form of hegemonic masculinity dominates in the lives of women living in street-based communities can simply be seen by looking at the high rates of violent victimization experienced by homeless women once they enter this domain of male privilege (author cite; Hudson, Wright, Bhattacharya et al. 2010; Jasinski, Wesely, Wright et al. 2010). Writing of victimized homeless women in Florida, Jana Jasinski and her colleagues (2010: 66) state, "they learned that they lived in a dangerous world, and if they did not protect themselves, no one else would."

A sizeable literature on the experience of impoverished inner-city girls and young women has documented both their adoption of street values (Brookman, Bennett, Hochstetler et al. 2011; Jones 2008; Maher and Daly 1996; Miller 1998; Nowacki 2012), and the expression of these values through aggression aimed at garnering respect (Jones 2004, 2008; Maher et al. 1996). In their study of women in the street-level drug trade – a highly gendered area of the illegal economy within which masculinist values clearly predominate – Maher and Daly (1996: 477)

note that women had to project a "street persona … [as] a necessary survival strategy" (see also Grundetjern and Sandberg, 2012). However, less is known of how homeless women in street-based communities, a more heterogeneous group, negotiate street norms in order to protect themselves from victimization, or the extent to which they are willing to engage in behaviours associated with the Code (ie. fronting and/or engaging in acts of violence). In a prior study, a handful of homeless women stated they were willing to engage in acts of instrumental violence, explicitly acknowledging that this willingness was predicated on the culturally-rooted belief that one needs to develop a tough 'street rep' as a shield against possible predatory acts (author cite). While offering some insight into this phenomenon, this earlier work reveals little in terms of differences in levels of street enculturation and how such variations might affect how women speak of violence. The little we do know about homeless women's use of fronting is that it hides how some women in this community really feel about violence and their experiences of it (author cite). The present paper is an attempt at exploring this issue in more detail in order to improve our understanding of how violence, and the street norms surrounding it, impact on the lives of homeless women.

Method of inquiry

This paper is drawn from a study conducted by my research team of issues related to trauma and resiliency in the lives of homeless women. For this project, two hundred and one (n=201) in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with women using the services of either a homeless shelter or transitional housing in the County of Los Angeles. Seventy-six of these interviews were selected for the analysis that informs the present paper, on the basis of the fact that each of the relevant participants, through discussion of their own victimization (intimate

partner violence, physical assault, sexual assault and/or witnessing significant violence) expressed thoughts, feelings and/or attitudes towards violence with the interviewer.

Data collection

To locate potential research participants, a non-probability sample was developed consisting of the maximum number of shelters and transitional housing programs that work with homeless women in Los Angeles. These organizations were approached to see if they would agree to participate in the study by facilitating access to their clients. In total, eight agencies agreed. All individuals who agreed to be interviewed at these sites were self-selected – that is, after being briefed on the study and its purposes, each person chose whether they wished to participate and then approached one of the interviewers[iii]. Criteria for inclusion were: 1. a minimum age of 18 years; 2. using the services of the selected agency, and; 3. appeared to be capable of providing informed consent[iii].

On average, interviews were typically of 40 minutes duration and were conducted using an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of questions related to six key areas: a) basic demographic information; b) traumatic events over the life course; c) participant self-identification as 'strong', 'weak' 'in between'; d) resiliency determinants (personality characteristics); e) resiliency processes (coping skills) and; f) suggestions for services. The bulk of the material presented in this paper is drawn from answers provided to questions on experiences of trauma over the life course. In this section of the interview, participants were asked a series of questions about various forms of trauma they may have experienced over their life course. In relation to violence during adulthood, women were asked if they had ever experienced intimate partner violence, physical assault from a non-partner, sexual assault and/or observed one or more incidents of serious physical violence (beatings, stabbings, shootings

and/or other attacks aimed at inflicting bodily harm). They were also asked about other potentially traumatic experiences, including incarceration, loss of loved ones, child custody issues and so on.

Data analysis

To code and analyze the data collected, thematic analysis was employed (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the first stages of coding, an inductive approach was used. First, participant responses, as indicated by an interviewer on the interview guide, were coded. This first coding step resulted in a data set that provided basic information regarding demographic factors (a woman's age, length of current homelessness), types of trauma experienced, coping skills used and so on. These results were subsequently verified against transcripts of the interviews, which had been audio recorded with participants' consent. To develop a set of thematic codes from the interviews, transcripts were read and notes taken on potentially interesting themes. It was during this step of the process that the possibility of a relationship between levels of street enculturation and the different ways in which women spoke of violence first emerged. To explore this potential relationship, I turned to the relevant research literature. In doing so, a series of sub-themes emerged that formed the basis of the codes used during the second stage of coding.

Table 1: Sub-themes used in coding for the theme of 'street orientation'

After coding individual responses[iv] across the 8 items above, participants were placed into one of three groups based on levels of street enculturation: 'low street,' 'medium street,' 'high street' on the basis of a scoring system. Zero or low involvement on an item was indicated with a 1, some involvement with a 2, and significant involvement was rated a 3. For example,

under ‘gang participation’, if a participant had had no interaction with gang activity, she received a 1 under this item. If she was gang affiliated (through a male partner or friends) but was not a gang member herself, she received a score of 2. If she was or had been a gang member herself, she received a 3 on this item. To further illustrate, in relation to the sub-theme of imprisonment, a woman who had never been in a custodial setting received a score of 1, a woman who had been in a municipal lock-up or county jail received a 2, and females who had been incarcerated in a state or federal penitentiary received a 3. Women whose overall score across each of the 8 items was 8-13 were categorized as ‘low street,’ women with a score of 14-18 as ‘medium street,’ and those with a score of 19-24 were treated as having a high level of street enculturation (‘high street’).

Sample description

Each of the women represented in this paper had experienced at least one form of violent victimization during adulthood. As can be seen in Table 2 below, thirty-one women had been physically assaulted (n=31), fifty-one had been a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV) (n=51), and thirty-eight (n=38) reported one or more episodes of sexual assault. A majority of the women (n=39) also stated they had observed one or more incidents of serious physical violence as adults. It is also worth noting that approximately 42% of respondents (n=32) reported having experienced two or more forms of violent victimization in adulthood.

Table 2: Violent victimization

Participant ages ranged from 21 to 70, with the mean age of participants being 47.0 years. Most (n=47) had been homeless more than once.

In relation to factors associated with levels of street entrenchment, Table 3 below provides an overview of how many of the respondent answers fell within each of the identified categories.

Table 3: Street entrenchment variables

To reiterate, individual women were scored from 1 to 3 on each of these categories and those with an overall score of 8-13 were categorized as 'low street,' those who received 14-18 as 'medium street,' 19-24 as 'high street'.

Table 4. Participant levels of street entrenchment

As can be seen in Table 4 above, thirty-three (n=33) women were scored as 'low street.' These were typically individuals who were newly homeless (less than a year), had never had prior experiences of homelessness or other exposure to street cultures, whose social networks were with family and non-street associated friends, who had never been arrested and who did not partake of street-based activities (such as engaging in street-based forms of subsistence). Several of the women in this group emphasized the fact their present state of homelessness was as a direct result of the faltering U.S. economy and an inability to secure permanent employment. Individuals within this group typically deplored the use of violence, were openly fearful of 'the streets' and willingly acknowledged feeling traumatized by their experiences of victimization.

Based on their scores, twenty-nine (n=29) women were placed within the 'medium street' category. This group included individuals whose length of current homelessness was generally one to three years, who been homeless on at least one prior occasion, had some exposure to street culture through friends and associates, had been jailed (county jail or municipal lockup) and

engaged in some street-based activities (such as subsistence activities like panhandling). Women categorized as having medium levels of street involvement varied in terms of their presentation of self. Some readily presented a tough street persona, whereas others looked down upon those who did or otherwise distanced themselves from street norms.

Fourteen women (n=14) received scores that resulted in placement within the 'high street' category. To illustrate, these were typically participants who had had multiple episodes of homelessness over several years and, as a result, whose social network was tied to the local street culture. They were also individuals who had subsisted in the underground economy by performing illegal activities (drug dealing, prostitution and robbery) and therefore had criminal histories that included not only stints in county jail, but also periods of incarceration in state penitentiaries. For example, one woman stated her previous occupation as: "a meth dealer [laughs]." Another was in and out of prison on multiple occasions because, "I sold crack cocaine. Quantities of it." The majority in this group also 'partied', using both drugs and alcohol. A few were on the fringes of street gang activity and others participated directly. One woman was in a long-term relationship with an enforcer with the Mexican Mafia; another was raised in the family of a notorious leader of the Crips. Early in interviews, these women presented tough exteriors, evincing attitudes through words or actions that suggested they held street-based views of violence and accepted its use as a normal fact of street life.

Attitudes toward violence

As noted, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about traumatic experiences and their coping styles/strategies. These interviews were often far-ranging and frequently provided detailed insights into participants' thoughts and feelings about witnessing,

experiencing and engaging in acts of violence. As a result, it was possible to identify three sub-themes related to attitudes towards violence and to code respondent comments and behaviours accordingly. These sub-themes (discussed in more detail below) were: 1. non-violence; 2. violence-accepting, and; 3. violence-enacting.

Table 5. Low street attitudes

As can be seen in Table 5 above, the majority of women (n=31) categorized as 'low street' presented themselves as non-violent in both attitude and behaviour. Some spoke directly to the issue of their belief in non-violence. For example, one woman, a victim of sexual assault, referenced pacifist beliefs in describing how she was finding it difficult to cope with the stresses of life in the shelter: "I don't want to snap," she explained, "because I don't believe in violence. I believe in peace and love and getting along with people." Another woman, a domestic violence survivor, displayed a similar attitude in repeatedly informing the interviewer that she wanted "to become a Domestic Violence Advocate." Others exhibited non-violent attitudes through statements decrying what they saw as the violence of life on the streets, which they sometimes found echoed within the city's shelters. For instance, Belle, a 51 year old domestic violence survivor spoke of being "afraid all the time" because "people get very explosive." Another woman described the violent behaviours she had observed in her shelter as "terrifying … a nightmare." Lisa, also a victim of IPV, was firm about her zero tolerance policy against violence anywhere in her vicinity. When asked if the disputes that occur frequently at her shelter ever manifest in physical violence, she responded, "not with me because I know certain people here [referring to staff members], or people know I go talk to security."

Not all of the women who received lower scores with respect to the eight street enculturation items exhibited non-violent attitudes. Indeed, two admitted to having been violent

themselves. One of these women was Rikki, the IPV survivor who laughed when describing an incident in which she shot at her former husband. Another was Meredith who, when asked if she had ever been in jail, acknowledged having been arrested for IPV. She described her arrest as follows: "I went to jail because the guy I was with, when I was with him … he wanted me to stay with him. He was on the streets. He wasn't doing nothing. He didn't want to work. I was hitting him, so somebody called the cops." She opined that she was entitled to hit him because "he used to slap me before."

Table 6. Medium street attitudes

'Medium street' participants presented a diverse array of attitudes towards violence. Various attempts were made to identify discernable patterns demonstrating links between, first overall scores women received and views or behaviours, and then between individual items and expressed thoughts or behaviours. None was clearly identified[v]. What the scoring did reveal, as can be seen in Table 6 above, is that thirteen of the women (n=13) presented themselves as non-violent, again, typically through words that decried the violence they experienced around them. An example of this was found in the words of a newly sober 53 year old woman, Melanie, whose family became homeless when they abandoned an apartment in a dangerous housing block following a shooting. "They always had arguments and fighting and something going on. My kids didn't even like going out of the house at that point. The last straw was when the guy got killed out front of the building. We were like, 'we gotta go.'" Similarly, Jewel, a woman living in one of the Skid Row shelters noted her fear of the violence on the streets outside, "they had a big fight out there the other day and it got me real scared!" As a result, she stays inside the shelter as much as possible.

Some women in the medium street group spoke in ways that suggested they were willing to accept violence as part of 'street life.' One was a woman whose former partner was 'an enforcer' in a Latino gang. Although Alicia herself was not directly involved in gang activity, she knew of his role in the gang and remained with him until "they got him for kidnap and stuff." The relationship only ended, she said, when she decided that she did not want to wait for him to be released from prison. More frequently the appearance of accepting violence as part of street life was evidenced in how women spoke of their feelings toward the violence they themselves had experienced. A notable instance was found in the words of Carina, who had been sexually assaulted by one of the members of her street community. She described the experience as follows: "I got choked out. My teeth got cracked. I got raped. And I went with it. I was like, 'pussy is all you want? Alright. Woo hoo. Then get the fuck out of here.' I never intended to give him any. I never intended for it to be that, period." When asked how she responded afterwards, she simply replied, "I got over it."

Rikki was not the only individual to acknowledge having fired a weapon at a partner. Among the medium-street participants were several women who had themselves been violent towards others. Shonda, a 54 year old woman who has been homeless off and on over the past 25 years, was an example from this group. In response to a question about how she dealt with physical abuse by an ex-partner, Shonda replied:

> A: I bought a gun. I was tired of getting beat up. Back then it was easy to get guns. I bought a shot gun. I was getting ready to have my baby and the day of the baby shower he came and kicked the door open and I shot at him. If it wasn't for this lady, my neighbour, grabbing the shotgun up, he'd have been a dead person [slaps her hands together to mimic the sound of shots].
>
> Q: You must've scared the shit out of him.
>
> A: I asked him how he wanted to go home to Ohio to his mother. In a wood box or on the bus with nothing to eat for 3 days? So, he chose not to eat for 3 days.

Shonda then revealed that her ex-partner had contacted her recently about getting back together. “The thing is he’s sick. He’s had back surgeries, tubes in him.” “‘If you come out here,” Shonda says she told him, “‘I will push you out of a window.’” Marisol, a 58 year old woman who had been homeless for nine years after living in various crack houses, repeatedly advised that she would “beat any bitches” who ‘disrespected’ her.’ To illustrate, she told a story of being accused of stealing by her former roommates. “I told them,” she said, ‘I’ll see you outside and I’ll beat the hell out of you and I’ll show you a little bit of manners. Don’t ever talk to me like that again.’” To emphasize her point, she added, “I don’t let no bitch in here [her shelter] disrespect me. I’m not going to stand there and argue with them. I’m going to slap them around.” These were not idle threats: Marisol had earned a reputation for fighting and was known to be connected to one of the local gangs.

Table 7. High street attitudes

In the ‘high street’ group, the women were overwhelmingly likely to exhibit signs during the interview of both an overt acceptance of violence as a part of life and a willingness to enact violence against others (see Table 7). Indeed, only two women (n=2) in this group did not cite an episode in which they had enacted violence, and one was an individual who otherwise manifested an acceptance of the use of violence by others. The exception was Aisha, a fifty-three year old African American woman who had spent years living on the streets, addicted to drugs and surviving through sex work. Asked whether she had ever been involved gang activity, her response was immediate: “No, thank God.” While discussing the victimization women experience on the streets, Aisha made it evident that she had no interest in following street

norms, which sanction retaliation while prohibiting 'snitching'. "I wouldn't even settle for it," she said referring to the dangers women face on the streets, "I would go to the police station."

The second woman in this group who did not cite an episode in which she had used physical violence was Joelle, who otherwise offered statements and stories indicating an acceptance of violence as a normal part of street life. Having kicked her own drug habit some sixteen years earlier, Joelle had spent years in and out of prison, earning a living on the outside as a drug dealer. In discussing the violence associated with dealing, she casually referred to situations in which "another drug dealer would've beat somebody down." While Joelle did not admit to having enacted violence herself, she was forthright about other ways in which she enacted street code, particularly through her use of physical intimidation. During her periods of incarceration she engaged in intensive body building with the result that, "I built something like a man's body. I could be intimidating. Very intimidating." On the street, Joelle consciously uses her size to her advantage: "down here, I'm intimidating … that's something that suits me fine. That's necessary down here. Nobody gonna talk crazy to me."

More typical of the participants in the 'high street' group were women who openly acknowledged their willingness to use violence. One of this group was a 22 year old gang member, Valeeta, who was proud of her mode of initiation into her gang: "I did get jumped, but I'm a fighter so it really didn't faze me." Within the walls of the shelter, Valeeta was making a conscious effort to curb her aggression, by avoiding "females or people my age, because it's too much drama and it's like the way my temper is, I'd be liable to going to jail for hurting somebody." A 30 year old former drug dealer, Tawny, spoke of "gang-banging" with associates in the local Crips, a street gang to which she had once belonged. Her experiences included having "been in shootings" during turf wars and retaliatory strikes. At first she acknowledged

having “been in a car when they all pull out the guns and drive by.” Tawny subsequently admitted to a deeper participation in drive-by shootings: “I’ve done it.” In prison, she also “did some hard time” after a physical altercation with a correctional officer. When asked what she went to prison for, Kelly, a drug dealer replied nonchalantly, “Violence. The first time it was terrorist threats. The second time was assault to do GBH [grievous bodily harm].” A former drug dealer, Cindra, appeared amused over the fact that “the really bad stuff, I never got caught for.” When asked what was “the worst of the really bad stuff” entailed, she replied, “Uhm … manufacture [sic] drugs … uhm, and then, the other one was, assault with a deadly weapon with intent to do bodily harm. I did do that, but they let me go [shrugs].”

Peeling back the layers

Based on the preceding analysis it would appear that there is a relationship between levels of street enculturation and a woman’s willingness to accept violence as part of street life and/or to engage in acts of violence. However, further analysis of the interviews of those categorized here as ‘medium-’ or ‘high street’ reveal a significantly more complex picture. Many of the indicators earlier in the interview that suggested these women were casually accepting of violence were subsequently contradicted by later statements in which they revealed the emotional toll that the violence in their lives had taken. As a result, it became evident that many of the women had been ‘fronting’ – that is, adopting the tough guise privileged on the street – when in reality they had been deeply traumatized by the violence they experienced and saw around them.

Tamara was one of the first interviewees who, as a woman deeply involved in street life, revealed the extent to which she was suffering mentally and emotionally as a result of the effects of violence. Twenty-one years old, Tamara was on parole having just been released from

Chowchilla prison for stealing a car. Her arrest record included robbery, auto thefts and several probation violations. At the beginning of the interview, she was cool and wary, revealing little. As she grew more comfortable, she let her guard down, and, when asked if she had any interest in going back to school, began to cry softly. In response to the question, she said, "I'm doing this all on my own. I'm only 21 and I'm tired. I feel like taking my life already. I get choked in my sleep down here. I got spit on by a guy. I got knocked out … and everything I got now I hustled it up on my own. [crying] I'm tired. I'm tired of everything. This world is really fucked up."

Carina, who makes her living selling water on the streets, is also well enmeshed with street life, having first become homeless shortly after she was released from foster care. Having been physically, sexually and emotionally abused as a child, Carina had not only been sexually assaulted a few years ago, but has been repeatedly threatened with physical violence by males. She spoke openly about a recent event in which she had lashed out when triggered by being touched without her consent: "I totally reacted without thinking. I turned around and grabbed homeboy by the throat. 'What the fuck? Don't touch me.' He was like, 'I was just trying to get your attention.' Then he responded, 'I'll beat you down like a man. I don't give a fuck. Look me in my eye.' 'I'm looking you in your eye. Don't smack my ass.'" When subsequently asked if she sees herself as a strong individual, she replied in the negative:

> [shakes head]. Strength comes from not allowing things to affect you. Things affect me. Physically strong? To a certain degree. Because you have to carry your weight. Emotionally? You have to be numb. There is no strength in emotions. It's not that it's a disgrace or a dishonour to cry, but it's a last resort. It's like one of those things … I can't do this anymore. Whatever I can't do, I'm gonna cry. Just like a little bitch.

Tamara and Carina were hardly alone. In relating the details of her life, fourty-four year old Annie spoke of having survived parental abuse, being thrown out of her house at 12, having been gang raped at 14, followed by years of violence through being associated with street gangs.

Her arrest record for drug-related offences was long, and she estimated she had been "in county jail probably all together three years." In describing the years she spent 'gang banging,' she said, "I watched a girl associated get her brains blown out right in front of me." Despite the cool exterior she projected, Annie acknowledged the toll that years of violence had taken on her: "I've witnessed a lot and experienced a lot against me, and other people. I've ... too much. It's all coming back to haunt me now." Although much younger, Cindy had a similar background: "22 years old, you'd thing okay she hasn't even started living. [But] it's been a long road, foster care, gang banging, all that." When asked about how she copes with memories of the past, she responded, "To be truthful … I haven't coped ... I've always been the type to push it to the back … but at the end of the day, that pain, that thought is still there ... I mean there's days where it won't bother me at all and then there's days where I'll break down crying." When Joelle, the recently paroled drug dealer, was asked if she had ever witnessed violence as an adult, she replied laconically, "yeah, me." Later in the interview, she acknowledged the fragile emotional state underlying the tough shell she chooses to project: "I just have to get myself together [crying]."

In many respects Kat is the epitome of a woman who has survived years of street life. She exhibits a cool, tough demeanor, remaining largely calm and unflappable during a series of questions about the forms of victimization she has experienced as an adult, victimization that includes sexual assault. When asked the types of charges that have landed her in and out of jail, the former drug dealer laughed, "Where do we start at? You want to know everything I went to jail for? First off, it started with tickets. Then I went for attempted murder. My last one was for criminal threats with a firearm." It is only in response to an interviewer's remark about her calm exterior when discussing the violence she has seen and experienced that Kat lets down her guard:

"I seen a lot of stuff in my life. I wouldn't even say I had scars. I would have wounds. That's what I would call it: open wounds."

Other indicators of distress

As may be recalled, the focus of the larger study from which the present paper is drawn was on trauma and resiliency formation in the lives of homeless women. In relation to the latter, the interview guide contained a number of questions about coping strategies, including one that asked whether participants were presently utilizing mental health services and/or had done so in the past. In answering this question, women often cited feelings of post-traumatic distress they were dealing with, such as depression and anxiety, or referred to mental health diagnoses they Participant responses to this question thus provide another means by which we can see the toll that exposure to violence has had on women whose participation in street culture might lead them to 'front.'

Among such women was Yolanda, a 61 year old woman who had spent decades associating with gangs and who continued to maintain an active connection to one local gang through her son, a member. Yolanda, whose presentation of self was as an individual who was as tough as nails, shared several stories of violence she had observed or participated in. One such story involved a shooting at a party and her role in disposing of the gun. Another incident began with the recent drive-by shooting of a friend. Using her connections, Yolanda helped the deceased's friends and family members by contacting acquaintances to stage a retaliation shooting. Describing the latter, she said simply, "the problem was taken care of." Despite her nonchalant demeanour while sharing these and other violent stories, Yolanda subsequently revealed the toll that life on the streets had taken: she has been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and goes through what she described as "little stages where I have

meltdowns." The cause of these 'meltdowns,' she said, is "everything … it runs together." Selina, a former drug addict and gang member who admitted to having physically assaulted both her partner and her sister, was also suffering from PTSD as a result of a rape. Khadija is yet another woman diagnosed with PTSD. Having grown up in in a neighbourhood controlled by the Crips, and within a family with gang ties, she recalled a life of being surrounded by the violence of gangs and drugs. An admitted 'fighter' willing to get into physical altercations with other women, she said of herself, "I'm used to seeing blood and violence." While describing a situation in which a man was murdered in front of her over drugs, she shrugged, "it didn't really impact me." Despite this apparent indifference, Khadija has, however, been deeply impacted by violence. She was sexually assaulted and has been diagnosed with PTSD: "I'm post-traumatic stress due to the rape," she explained.

Other participants spoke of having either been diagnosed with clinical depression or of struggling with feelings of depression for which they had not sought therapeutic assistance. Carina was one of the latter. While answering a question about surviving on the streets for as long as she has, she replied, "at some point you get really tired of being strong, so you shut down. For a while, I was in a funk. I was in a real bad funk. I couldn't even describe to you some of the things I've seen … that fucked me up really bad." Ariel, who stabbed her ex-boyfriend and laughs about fantasizing about killing her current boyfriend, repeatedly described herself as 'tired' and having a low mood. During the interview, she revealed that she recently came off the street – where she had been sleeping in a tent on the city sidewalks for years – and into a shelter, specifically so that she could access mental health counseling.

Janine, a victim of intimate partner violence, was sexually abused as a child. She has spent years struggling with addictions to alcohol and crack cocaine and has been diagnosed with

both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Although she did not directly relate stories indicating that she had herself been violent towards others, her openly expressed violent feelings toward someone she felt had wronged her family. While the expression of these sentiments may have simply been posturing, or angry words with no intention behind them, they were sufficient to convince a parole board to deny her an early release. "I think that's why they kept me an extra year," she said, "'cuz I said I was going to cut his dick off, his nuts, everything!" Memories of the violence in Janine's past frequently overwhelm her. As a result she has bouts of what she described as the "fuck its," episodes of severe depression during which she does little but "procrastinate on everything in life but dope."

Discussion

In the late 1980s, social scientists began to draw attention to the ways in which young, impoverished men, predominantly from African American and other ethnic minority groups negotiated the inner-city violence within which they found themselves. In response to that violence, they developed what has been termed a "poor-man's masculinity" that embraced intimidation and aggression as legitimate social responses when alternate social resources were unavailable for them to draw upon in resolving conflict (Jones 2008: 78). This form of masculinity was embodied within a set of prescriptions referred to as the 'code of the street' (Anderson 1989). Despite the fact that women and girls also inhabit the same social and physical spaces known as 'the streets,' and are also subject to many of the same social and cultural constraints as young males, relative to their male counterparts their lives are less frequently the subject of sociological inquiry (Jones 2008; author cite; Miller 2008). The present study is intended to improve our understanding of how women in street-based cultures process the violence that often surrounds their lives.

Through the preceding pages, this paper offered an exploration of the role that street enculturation can play in how influencing how homeless women speak about violence to outsiders. To the extent that women with higher levels of street enculturation were more likely to speak positively about the use of violence, as well as to cite instances where they had enacted it upon others, the findings of this study accord with previous research that shows that some women living within street-based cultures – typically those who are most street enculturated – adopt key tenets of the code of the street in order to conform to local normative values (Anderson 1999; Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins 2006). Careful examination of their stories reveals, however, that tough and/or aggressive posturing is often evidence of engagement in activity well-known within street cultures: fronting. In essence, women frequently adopted a tough persona and it was this persona they initially presented to the interviewer. Only later in the interview, when rapport was established, that the participant felt more comfortable sharing with the interviewer a fuller sense of who they are, their actual attitudes toward the violence they had seen and experienced and the impact this violence had had upon them.

Previous studies have presented fronting as a prescribed act within street cultures aimed at reducing one's risk of victimization (Jones 2008). In line with this literature, this study also found that several of the women fronted in order to render themselves as less of a target for violence in the streets. Joelle, the former drug dealer who consciously built up a muscular physique in order to be more intimidating, represents a case in point. However, fronting among study participants was also seen to serve another purpose: it allows women impacted by violence to emotionally and psychologically shield themselves from the effects of their victimization, and/or from the violence they had witnessed or themselves perpetrated. This psychological barrier was erected through 'distancing' language, gestures and behaviours that minimized both

the violence and its effects – a phenomenon referred to by Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012) as 'emotional detachment.' Examples of such distancing include Rikki's laughter when describing her shooting at an abusive husband and Carina's dismissive reference to her sexual assault as being about the rapist "wanting pussy," and as something she just "got over."

This paper also offers empirical support for the position that there is a need to contextualize both women's acceptance and use of violence in the streets, and their presentations of self when discussing that violence. There is a tendency in mass media and other popular accounts to paint such women as 'pathological creatures', while conveniently ignoring structural and cultural factors that render violence not only a viable solution to addressing one's problems, but sometimes a necessary act (Dunlap et al. 1999; Jones 2004; Ness 2010). It is not coincidental that Rikki, Meredith and Shonda, among other who were seen to be both accepting of violence and willing to enact it, drew on violence in response to situations in which they had been repeatedly battered and/or sexually assaulted. Like other women, such as Yolanda, they had little faith in the ability of social institutions to keep them or their loved ones safe, and thus they relied on themselves or, in the case of Yolanda, turned to the streets for justice and/or the neutralization of a threat to their physical safety.

While it would be easy to be disturbed by the fact of individuals speaking casually, sometimes laughingly over acts of violence, the reality is that most of these women were anything but untouched by their experiences, a position supported by two key sources within the data. The first is the distress participants manifested when they had dropped their guards, as evidenced by Tamara's suicidal despair over the various traumatic experiences she had endured and by Carina's feelings of weakness over her inability to remain numb, and thus untouched by episodes of sexual and physical assault. The second indicator that women were not nearly as

impervious to the effects of violence as they had first appeared were the symptoms of trauma they manifest. Women, such as Yolanda and Khadija, had been diagnosed with PTSD, whereas Carina, Janine and Ariel acknowledged struggling with depression.

While much has already been said within the literature on the role of street norms in directing individual and group behaviours, significantly less has been said about how individuals within and across street-based populations generally (see Rich and Grey 2005), and homeless women particularly (author cite), process violence and live with it not only in their environs, but in their lives. This paper thus represents something of a departure by highlighting the fact that the relationship street-based women have to violence is significantly more complex than they may let on to others.

In closing, it should be noted that the present paper is not without limitations. One consideration is the possibility that low street women and/or some medium street women hid or minimized their actual views on violence in order to gain interviewer acceptance or avoid perceived judgment by the interviewer – that is, they wanted to be seen as conforming to wider social views of interpersonal aggression. Further, there is also the issue of sample size. Although the number of interviews drawn upon for this paper represent a respectable size for qualitative work of this nature, future research in this area could benefit from the inclusion of both quantitative and mixed-methodological studies with larger sample sizes.

References

Anderson, E. (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Anderson, E. (1994) ‘“The Code of the Streets’. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 273, 81–93.

Anderson, R. (1996) “Homeless Violence and the Informal Rules of Street Life.” *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 5, 369-380.

Brookman, F., Bennett, T., Hochstetler, A. et al. (2011) “The ‘Code of the Street’ and the Generation of Street Violence in the UK.” *European Journal of Criminology* 8, 17–31.

Dance, L. (2002) *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. New York: Routledge.

Dunlap, E., Johnson, B., and Maher, L. (1997) “Female Crack Sellers in New York City: Who They Are and What They Do.” *Women & Criminal Justice* 8, 25-55.

Froyum, C. (2013) “Leaving the Street Alone: Contesting Street Manhood as a Gender Project.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 22, 38–53.

Gowan, T. (2009) “New Hobos or Neo-Romantic Fantasy? Urban Ethnography Beyond the Neoliberal Disconnect.” *Qualitative Sociology* 32,231–257

Grundetjern, H. and Sandberg, S. 2012. “Dealing with a Gendered Economy: Female Drug Dealers and Street Capital.” *European Journal of Criminology* 9, 621–635.

Hudson, A., Wright, K., Bhattacharya, D. et al. (2010) “Correlates of Adult Assault among Homeless Women.” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 21, 1250-1261.

Jasinski, J., J. Wesely, J. Wright et al. (2010) *Hard Lives, Mean Streets: Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women*. Hanover, Mass.: Northeastern University Press.

Jones, N. (2004) “‘It’s Not Where You Live, It’s How You Live’: How Young Women Negotiate Conflict and Violence in the Inner City.” *The Annals Of The American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 541, 49-62.

Jones, N. (2008) “Working ‘the Code’: On Girls, Gender, and Inner-City Violence.” *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 41, 63–83.

McCarthy, B., and Hagan, J. (1992) “Surviving on the Street: The Experiences of Homeless Youth.” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 7, 412-430.

Maher, L. and Daly, K. (1996) "Women in the Street-Level Drug Economy: Continuity or Change?" *Criminology* 34, 465-491.

Maher, L, Dunlap, E., Johnson, B., and Hamid, A. (1996) "Gender, Power, and Alternative Living Arrangements in the Inner-City Crack culture." *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency* 33, 181-205.

Matsuda, K., Melde, C., Taylor, T., Freng, A. and Esbensen, F. (2013) "Gang Membership and Adherence to the Code of the Street." *Justice Quarterly* 30, 440–468.

Messerschmidt, J. (2000) *Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, the Body and Violence*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Miller, J. (1998) "Gender and Victimization Risk among Young Women in Gangs." *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency* 35, 429-453.

Miller, J. (2008) *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence.* New York: NYU Press.

Mullins, C. and Cardwell-Mullins, R. (2006) "Bad Ass or Punk Ass? The Contours of Street Masculinity", *Universitas*, 2. Retrieved from www.uni.edu/universitas/fall06/tocforum03.htm

Ness, C. (2010) *Why Girls Fight: Female Youth Violence in the Inner City*. New York: NYU Press.

Nowack, J. (2012) "Sugar, Spice, and Street Codes: The Influences of Gender and Family Attachment on Street Code Adoption." *Deviant Behavior* 33, 831–844.

Piquero, A., Intravia, J., Stewart, E. et al. (2012) "Investigating the Determinants of the Street Code and its Relation to Offending among Adults." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, 19–32.

Rich, J. and Grey, C. (2005) "Pathways to Recurrent Trauma Among Young Black Men: Traumatic Stress, Substance Use, and the Code of the Street." *American Journal of Public Health* 95, 816-824.

Rowe, S., and Wolch, J. (1990) "Social Networks in Time and Space: Homeless Women in Skid Row, Los Angeles." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, 184-204.

Wardhaugh, J. (1999) "The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness And Identity". *Sociological Review* 47, 91-120.

Wenzel, S. Leake, B. and Gelberg, L. (2001) "Risk Factors for Major Violence Among Homeless Women." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16, 739-752.

Notes

[i] All research was performed in accordance with university ethics standards and those established by the Canadian research Tri-council.

[ii] Each participant received a $10 gift card to either Walgreen's or McDonald's.

[iii] This was determined by whether a woman appeared sober and lucid during the pre-interview discussion.

[iv] Any participant for which I did not have complete data was excluded.

[v] For example, the average score for women in the non-violent group was 16, whereas the violence accepting group had an average score of 15.2 and the violence enacting group averaged a score of 16.2. There was also seen to be no clear relation to score on individual factors such as length of homelessness, multiple homelessness, jail, substance use and, surprisingly, gang affiliation. I do note, however, that among the very small number of non-violent women who had been gang affiliated was one who stated she had left because of the violence of other members.