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**Street Social Capital in the Liquid City: A male youth offending group on the socio-economic periphery of Dublin**

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I walk out of the youth club to see Wacker (14 years old) assailing the 18 year old and much larger Philo. Philo has his back to the wall; Wacker's face is inches away from him.<sup>1</sup>

Wacker: 'What the fuck was that? Who do you think you are? I'll fucken kill ya, I'm not afraid of ya.' He is aggressive in the way he talks, rapidly spitting out every phrase. He is shoving Philo with his hand to emphasise the threat in every sentence. He completes this rally with a fake head-butt, high in both force and accuracy that stops short of breaking Philo's nose by a matter of millimetres. Philo flinches back. At that Wacker seems satisfied that his point is made, 'shite-bag' he mutters as he returns to rest his back on the car the others are leaning against. He takes a joint from Mano (16 years old): 'Ah yeah, smoke a bit of this' he chirps triumphantly. He is clearly elated by his victory and returns to his conversation with the other two young men, pointedly ignoring Philo who is left silent and submissive... I discuss the incident with Philo, Wacker overhears us and is obviously not happy with the interpretation of the events that has been offered, he interjects and Philo begins to assert his case.

Wacker: 'Shut up, I'm done talking to you, bleedin' throwin' bottles!' (The incident had been sparked when Philo jokingly threw an empty plastic bottle at Wacker). With his last indication of disdain, Wacker turns around to finish his conversation, still very jovial towards the others. He is saying by his demeanour: this doesn't bother me, I'm in control. (Extract from fieldnotes)

I recorded these events at a later stage of my fieldwork with *The Crew*, a fluid youth offending group who often spend time in *Northstreet*, a publicly-owned social housing estate in inner-city Dublin, Ireland. By this stage, I had come to understand that much as *The Crew* appeared to occupy *Northstreet* as a kind of territory, most of its members were defined as 'blow ins' (new arrivals) by its established community. These are not young working-class men who had grown up together from infancy, but a collective whose composition was volatile and constantly evolving. There was little

evidence of an established pecking order within the group, but instead a set of negotiable and negotiated relationships where influence is earned or lost based on an ability to demonstrate dedication to its subcultural values. Theft, violence and drug consumption provide a shared repertoire of strategies to achieve street-culturally mediated goals. Demonstrating competencies and capacities in such activities provides leverage in an individualised economy of prestige.

Here, Wacker, who has managed to carve out something of a leadership role embodies a will to violence which cements his standing as an arbiter of reality. His interpretation of events becomes widely accepted amongst the group. His young age, diminutive size and childish features become irrelevant as any challenge potentially posed by the larger and older Philo is neutralised. This is important; Philo had arrived in *Northstreet* only some months previously and might have garnered some influence given his (unsuccessful but ambitious) forays into semi-organised crime. Wacker himself does not live on the street, but had moved from a suburban public housing estate to a close-by street four years previously. As *The Crew* and the many young disadvantaged men like them relocate around Dublin between archipelagos of less-desirable addresses they must reorientate themselves, make new friends and find new opportunities for leisure, income, support and dignity.

In this article I demonstrate how street culture becomes a resource utilised by a group of socio-economically disadvantaged young men to navigate their lives, exclusion and experiences of the post-industrial city. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, I describe a set of spatial practices which speak to late-modern configurations of socio-economic disadvantage, providing a theoretical explanation rooted in an understanding of social capital and 'the liquid'. In common with a growing body of literature (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004), I suggest that it is not useful to unreflexively deploy 'gang discourse' which can imply particular pathological territorial tendencies. Instead, I take seriously Hagedorn's suggestion that we must study 'the redivision of space' in contexts of late-modernity (2007: 3). In examining why some see young disadvantaged men as limited by their communities of origin (e.g. MacDonald et al., 2005; MacDonald and Shildrick,

2007), while others see them as participating in broader processes of cosmopolitan mobility (e.g. Forrest and Kearns, 2001), I argue that it is important to pay attention to the role of social networks, how these manifest in forms of social capital and impact on spatial practice.

Specifically, this article demonstrates that the forms of social capital which can be usefully expended by disadvantaged young people relate to their levels of inclusion and their power over space. Drawing on Sandberg's notion of street capital (2008a; 2008b), I illustrate how street networks have allowed my participants to maintain a constant cultural terrain whilst subject to the whims of the private housing market, the vicissitudes of public housing policy, the decisions of their families and the tragedy of their circumstances. These young people have become equipped to exploit illicit opportunities for amusement, economic gain and a subculturally specific sense of personal achievement as they traverse a liquid city.

### **Street lives and culture in the solid city**

An important concept to have emerged from ethnographies of the socio-economically disadvantaged offender is that of 'street culture', which Bourgois has defined as 'a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that have emerged in the opposition to exclusion from mainstream society' (2003: 8). Anderson (1999) understands street culture as operating through informal 'respect' based hierarchies generated by the embodiment of violent potential and successful illicit entrepreneurialism. Leaving aside debates around the fundamentally oppositional nature of street culture, it is important to acknowledge the debt it owes to early configurations of subcultural theory (e.g. Cohen, 1955) specifically where the nature of subcultures were linked to the particular characteristics of differing disadvantaged communities (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960).

From Chicago to Liverpool the bulk of studies on working-class male youth cultures have taken place within the solid city. This is not to connote a fixed city, devoid of human movement and

neighbourhood change; on the contrary, such population change has been characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> century urban life. The solidity refers to a sense of cohesion within particular groups and communities, a connection between geographical spaces and stable sources of industrial employment, and a reification of locality as a marker of place and identification. Such solidity allowed for Thrasher's gangs to divide their Chicago into a 'patchwork' of territories, the symbolic defence of which crystallised their group identity (Thrasher, 1927). Youthful local identities then produce adult social configurations, whether offending or otherwise (see Whyte, 1943). The notion of internecine territorial conflict resonates in later works by Suttles (1968) and throughout the later corpus of American ethnographic gang studies (e.g. Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). The topography of the traditionally conceived gangland is defined by cognitive maps which divide the city into a range of safe and dangerous spaces which must be carefully navigated. Locality was central to gang culture where cliques sometimes take their names from their street(s) of origin.

In the solid city, the locality is the prime location for the performance of work and leisure: simultaneously constituted or distinct, legal or otherwise. Thus Willis' (1977) working-class kids find their working-class jobs geographically proximate to their fathers' shop floors and the 'lads' observed by Paul Corrigan (1979) are confined by limited financial resources to 'hanging around' their local street spaces. In such a manner, the neighbourhood can be a constraining force limiting the opportunities for economic and social realisation, narrowing horizons, compounding and reproducing exclusion. On the other hand, the locality in the solid city can serve as a haven, around which residents can construct a sense of pride and where a sympathetic community allows those who offend to shelter from state censure (see Parker, 1974). Within the solid city thus, territory represents a key resource for young disadvantaged men: an identifying totem and in the tradition of the Birmingham School, a 'solution' to their position at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy:

'Territoriality' is a symbolic process of magically appropriating, owning and controlling the material environment in which you live, but in real, economic terms is owned and controlled by 'outsiders' – in our society, by private landlords or the State (Robins & Cohen, 1978: 73).

The challenge for contemporary ethnography is to understand the lived experience of young working-class men in the more complex conditions of late-modernity. Thus, on the one hand, young men in the post-industrial north of England are firmly embedded in local street cultural networks which limit the possibilities of experiencing wider geographic, social and economic realities (MacDonald et al., 2005) while Dominican deportees from the US may be forced into spatial migrations between zones of exclusion which span both countries (Brotherton and Barrios, 2011). Such complexities are arguably a result of the 'liquidity' some theorists see as defining contemporary life (see in particular Bauman, 2000). According to this discourse, the post-Fordist economy creates flows of labour and capital which erode solidity. Instead, processes of identity formation become tied to consumer decisions and self-narration in an increasingly individualised, instrumental and uncertain world where technological developments facilitate the rapid movement of people and information. This has particular implications for disadvantaged populations whose labour value is diminished and whose fortunes are increasingly subject to crime control policies which seek to discipline them through processes exacerbating their marginalisation (Young, 1999). Cities such as Dublin are arguably becoming more unequal, intermingled and porous (see Young, 2007). In these contexts, do disadvantaged young men living in the liquid city reify locality in a similar manner to those observed in earlier studies? Can they rely on the same opportunities, resources and levels of community cohesion as their counterparts in earlier ethnographies?

### **Studying street lives**

These questions were far from my mind when I began fieldwork in *Northstreet* in May 2004 (continuing until October 2005). Having studied the ethnographic literature cited above, I had hoped to replicate such research in an Irish context, an endeavour which had not yet been attempted. In

*The Crew*, I had expected to encounter young men who were clearly members of a particular community, whose delinquency would be viewed by their elders as youthful follies from which they would eventually distance themselves as they grew to become established members of the community. This transpired not to be the case. I eventually became aware that a network of professional youth and social workers were continuously performing advocacy on behalf of *Crew* members when *Northstreet* community leaders and the municipal management sought to censure them and their families. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that the community's rejection of *The Crew* related to an attempt by its leadership to reconstruct their area as 'respectable' space in a city of high property values (Ilan, 2011). As such, the young men and their families were frequently represented as problematic 'outsiders'.

My work with *The Crew* for a long time was mediated by *The Club*, a youth justice project on the edge of the estate. As a full-time volunteer there, I participated in and observed the progress of its efforts to move the young men away from street cultural values and practices. Despite identifying myself as an independent researcher, the gulf between me and my young participants in terms of age, social class, education and style ensured that through their cultural lens, I appeared little different to the variety of youth professionals who surrounded them. On the other hand, these workers identified with me and my studies and I rapidly achieved an insider status with them. I was readily accepted at a range of formal and informal meetings where details of their work, clients and personal lives were openly discussed. The field has a definite tendency to assign identities and shape the nature of field relations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 63).

This assigned identity created both challenges and opportunities. A more detailed account of the methodological and ethical issues associated with the study is set out elsewhere (Ilan, 2007). I participated daily in the lives of the community, youth group, workers and police officers over the course of fieldwork, complementing this with 45 formal interviews. Ultimately, whilst all core *Crew* members and their parents formally consented to participate in the research, the quality of each



day's access and data depended on the *Crew* members present (some sympathised with the study more than others), their activities on the day (there were some that they were not happy for me to observe) as well as the less tangible issues of 'mood' and group dynamics. I was thus constantly engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating meaningful access where different participants reacted varyingly to my presence and questions in different contexts.

Early interviews with *Crew* members were replete with obfuscations, denials of involvement in offending or even exaggerations of their activities calculated to sarcastically address both my tenacious attempts to understand their lives and populist media depictions of inner-city youth. Such defensive boundaries grew more porous over time, as I became much more acquainted with them, visiting their homes, collaborating with them on *Club* activities, hanging around with them on streets, accompanying them to various meetings and court hearings, playing endless games of pool in which I was consistently trounced. Ultimately, the young men allowed me a window into their street world, and I was allowed at times to accompany them 'cruising', their staple activity of walking around the city streets. Their vibrant conversation culture was opened up to me and my naïve questions could elicit tolerant responses. On one occasion Dommer (14 years of age) became amused when I asked how much money a stolen moped would yield: 'ya don't get a moped to sell, ya get it to rally around (joyride)!' In such a manner, I was able over time to determine the values and rules that underpinned group offending behaviours.

The theft of bicycles and mobile phones represented a means of generating independent income and displaying street-entrepreneurial acumen. Core *Crew* members know how to network with the older men who trade in stolen goods, to sell door-to-door within the community that ostensibly ostracises them, and which shopkeepers would be willing to obtain high value goods without inquiring about their origin. The young men would diversify in the goods they stole where they could anticipate a market amongst their various networks in other parts of the city. Financial gain was not the sole motivation for their offending. The joyriding of stolen mopeds in suburban fields

represented exciting times (see: Hayward, 2002) which fuelled their conversation culture for days. The young men smoked cannabis with a regularity that approached the ritual. Collective purchasing, possession and consumption of the drug served to underpin their friendship group. The young men engaged in and embodied violence in a manner that accords with existing accounts of street culture: to establish hierarchies, settle disputes, and impose their will (e.g. Anderson, 1999). However candid certain *Crew* members became in discussing their offending, many found it more difficult to openly discuss their lives beyond sparse facts. Thus whilst standard fieldwork had yielded a considerable degree of data relating to the street logics, values and culture underpinning *Crew* offending behaviours, additional steps were required to gain a fulsome picture of *Crew* lives.

Analysing biography facilitates an understanding of where broad social structures such as class and gender bisect with individual agency and manifest in particular offending lifestyles (Goodey, 2000). *Crew* members for the most part, however, were not prone to excessive self-reflection. Indeed, a number were reluctant to engage in formal interviews at all. Some of the young men patiently sat and answered my questions but mostly these were rather tense, uncomfortable interviews. Significant details tended to emerge in the course of casual conversations during those occasions where a sole *Crew* member and I would walk to some significant event: job centre appointments, court hearings and meetings with education and welfare workers. *The Club's* files were opened to me, and many workers shared with me what they knew of *Crew* biographic details. Triangulating these various sources with *Northstreet* 'flat talk' (local gossip), *Crew* parent interviews, formal and informal *Crew* accounts allowed for me to develop a number of composite life histories presented below. This, combined with the ethnographic accounts which follow, demonstrate how street cultural identities are a resource drawn upon by marginalised young men to navigate their socio-economic (macro) and spatial (micro) exclusion. The theoretical implications of these data will then be discussed in further detail.

### **The biographies of a fluid youth offending group**

Whilst considerably wider and more nuanced than the selective accounts below, the biographies of each *Crew* member variously reflect degrees of experienced spatial transience and familial tragedy. Although the young men would not articulate it beyond stating that they have lived 'all over', they experience urban space in a manner that is 'liquid'. They do not share strong connections with particular localities and communities and instead traverse the city either instrumentally or due to circumstances beyond their control. This material importantly grounds the effects of socio-economic disadvantage in the context of lived lives, and illuminates the individual circumstances that can contribute to a dedication to street culture.

Byrnesy (aged 17) had lived in the *Northstreet* flats for over five years before the commencement of fieldwork. He shares his family's functional public housing unit with his mother and older brother. This flat represents merely one of several residences which Byrnesy has called 'home', including amongst them an early childhood in a suburban housing estate and time spent living abroad. Byrnesy's mother's capillary reddened cheeks and trembling hands are a physical testament to the intense litany of tragedies her family have suffered: a nephew murdered, a daughter who overdosed and died, a second daughter in a secure mental institution. She has few friends locally and remains an isolated figure. *Crew* membership is the principle means by which Byrnesy can claim some sense of 'belonging' within the area.

Paddy and Macker (15 and 17 years of age respectively) are brothers who have developed a particularly dedicated, even somewhat professional approach to theft, a trait which proved influential in terms of *The Crew's* day-to-day activities. Their family's fortunes have been tied to changes in Irish housing policy where the Housing (Miscellaneous) Act 1997 empowered municipal authorities to evict tenants for 'anti-social behaviour' (see Norris and O'Connell, 2002). With their father jailed, the brothers together with their mother, younger sister and baby brother were evicted from their suburban council flat and plunged into the purgatory of 'transitional housing': moving

between temporary private rentals, emergency public housing and bed and breakfasts throughout the city. Their mother is often in poor health and when well has a reputation for heavy drinking. The brothers, thus, have used theft from an early age to ensure a level of financial independence. On the other hand, the geographic mobility afforded to them by their extended family allows them to access a range of markets for stolen goods.

Although dismissed by Macker as 'stupid things' (perhaps to anticipate an expected youth worker's interpretation of his activities), he lists his forays into robbing 'push bikes, mopeds (and) power tools' as instigating his initial contacts with the police during a relatively stilted interview. He went on to recount a time when he was able to steal a quantity of razors from a pharmacy and sell them door-to-door in his cousin's estate, 'a quiet area with lots of houses' (implying a more affluent area than the flat complex where he would have lived at the time). It is this kind of entrepreneurial acumen and the displays of daring that accompany their thefts that would have won these brothers esteem and currency amongst the changing array of peer groups they encountered as they were rehoused throughout Dublin. Thus, their embodiment of a street cultural identity supported their transience by ensuring a rather rapid acceptance by like-minded young people in a variety of disadvantaged communities. In this regard, their ability to deploy and negotiate violence where necessary proves to be a similar asset.

Dommer (14 years of age) draws on a more anarchic and mischievous persona than his *Crew* peers, often breaking out in fits of giggles or excited whooping as he wheels away a moped or sweeps off triumphantly on a stolen bicycle. He, his mother, father and young siblings live in a *Northstreet* flat, but remain isolated from a community they confess to disliking. They live far away from their supportive kinship networks based in the suburban area from which they were rehoused. The family's dislocation and isolation provides an interpretative frame for Dommer's attachment to offending and role within *The Crew*. He has special learning needs and attends a school for those with educational and behavioural problems. This has stigmatised him in the eyes of the wider

*Northstreet* community. From a young age children on the street were forbidden to 'pal around with' him. In fellow *Crew* members he found others in the same predicament: isolated within their wider peer group. He is able to use his knowledge of the suburbs to guide *The Crew* to ideal joyriding spots, which additionally offer the opportunity to escape the perceived hostile space of *Northstreet* and the controlling gaze of the community, parents and *Club* workers.

Dommer cycles ahead shouting about a moped he'd seen (he is riding a bicycle which Paddy maintains he generously 'let him have', making it clear that Dommer doesn't really deserve it as he 'did nothing' towards assisting in its theft).

To Paddy: 'Come on, we'll find that moped. I'll clip (hotwire) it and you take it'.

Macker (to me): 'Dommer's the biggest cunt of all of us. He's always finding us the bikes.

He's always grounded and wants to be where his Da can't find him: (imitating Dommer)

"Come on down this lane". Next ting ya know you're in [suburb]' (extract from fieldnotes).

Brothers Mano and Adam (16 and 14 years of age respectively) live in particularly insecure circumstances. The only *Crew* members 'born and reared' in *Northstreet*, their family's dysfunction has fuelled flat talk for decades, rendering their lives public property and marking them out as 'Other'. Facing threats of eviction from the Council, their mother signed her two sons into state care. Here, their 'challenging behaviour' and mother's objections to them living with another female relative saw them unable to secure a permanent placement. They were thrust into precarious circumstances moving between temporary institutional placements with occasional overnight stays with their mother. They frequently access emergency out-of-hours services, which force them to wait in the reviled space of the local police station to see if a bed can be found for them overnight. They have spent entire nights on the hard wooden benches of Garda station public waiting rooms due to a lack of beds available in care facilities. The fellowship of *Crew* membership and the thrills of

its collective activities provide the two young men a level of consistency, belonging and control otherwise absent from their lives.

Philo is the tall, slim man, 19 by the time I completed my fieldwork, who was rebuffed by Wacker in the vignette at the beginning of this article. Negotiating the more painful side of violent interactions is not, however, a novelty for Philo who bears a long knife scar on his forearm. Indeed, stoicism is a trait that has allowed Philo to negotiate a lifetime of tragedy with relatively good grace. 'Drugs is the only thing I know' is how he summarises his life story during a long interview in a youth club pool room. Both of his parents were involved in the drug trade and this resulted in his father's murder and mother's imprisonment. He has lived in care homes for much of his life, settling finally with a foster family for a period. There were few legitimate jobs he could square with his astronomical cannabis consumption and quick temper but he generated income through participation in stolen car part and drug markets. Having moved to *Northstreet* to lodge with his older sister, he promised her that he would avoid selling drugs and thus became involved in *Crew* activities in part to supplement his social welfare payments and in part to secure leisure opportunities in this new (to him) area of the city.

Wacker, the slight, wiry 14 year old who asserted his primacy over Philo is notable as *The Crew* member with perhaps the most stable and prosperous living arrangements. He lives with his mother, her partner and his younger brother in an apartment close to *Northstreet*, which is owned by a wealthier relative. Wacker's father (with whom he continues a relationship) and grandparents are based in the suburbs where he spent his childhood. Here he keeps his two motorised scramblers, often inviting his *Crew* peers to visit them. His father spent time in prison. On release and in employment as a large package courier he has impressed on his son the advantages of working for oneself: autonomy and entrepreneurialism. Wacker's exaggerated embeddedness in street culture may in part serve to anchor his identity to his family's criminal past as opposed to their more

prosperous present. His familiarity with suburban fields and bike racing serve both to maintain links to his old community and to capture the interest of his current peer group.

These composite biographies demonstrate each member of *The Crew's* precarious relationship to their place and community of residence. Each of their lives are characterised by varying permutations of tragedy and geographic movement which provided the impetus for the formation of their friendship group and their adherence to street cultures, matters that are intertwined. These issues are explored below as the biography of the offending youth group itself.

### **The biography of an offending youth group**

*The Crew* as a friendship group began to form approximately three to four years before I began my fieldwork. Not a 'gang' in any established sense of the term (e.g. Klein and Maxson, 2006) it is a loose and fluid friendship group revolving around the seven or so core members who are introduced in this article. Young men (almost never women) who live in adjoining flat complexes or are staying temporarily in near-by youth care homes join the core with varying degrees of frequency. They represent *The Crew's* peripheral membership. *The Crew* can manifest as two young men sitting on a wall speaking casually or as large gatherings in the centre of the *Northstreet* flat complex. Indeed, the young men do not recognise obligations or bounds to each other beyond those of (a street-culturally mediated version of) acquaintance and/or friendship. Their selection of *The Crew* as a moniker is a joke as much as anything else, a parody of the US gang culture to which they are exposed through the mass media.

The individual factors contributing to each *Crew* members participation in the collective were considered above, these are also underpinned by common demographic, social and emotional factors. In terms of age, gender and place of origin, *Crew* members tend to form a distinct demographic group within the overall *Northstreet* youth population whose male members are for the most part younger or older than *The Crew*. Whilst these other young men and age-equivalent

young women are more embedded in established kinship networks of support and co-parenting, more included in the community, *Crew* members arriving in the area had no advocates to contest suggestions that they were 'bad kids'. A mutual recognition of each other's outsider status created a powerful impetus to form a distinctive friendship group. Early *Crew* activities revolved around mischievous play that at times strayed into spectacular acts of offending. When aged between 10 and 12 four *Crew* members broke into a building site and attempted to drive off in a large JCB digger. Acts of opposition and daring were to become increasingly central to their identities and culture given their shared experiences of micro-exclusion from their community of residence.

Within *Northstreet's* internal hierarchy, there could be little doubt that *Crew* members were viewed as occupying a very low rung. Their life histories can form the basis of cruel mockery from the wider youth population who are forbidden by their parents from befriending the young men. Some of this wider group of young people on occasion issue barbed remarks about *Crew* member living arrangements, the less than pristine condition of their clothing and in a manner reminiscent of Douglas' (1966) notion of the polluted Other, their smell. Such comments, which draw on the disdain of the 'respectable' over the 'rough' working-class (see further – Ilan, 2011) can only be made in certain circumstances, where the insulter is female or a male confident that they will be able to avoid the inevitable physical retaliation. The tough demeanour of the street cultural adherent instils a sense of caution amongst potential verbal sparring partners. Indeed, the street-cultural cache of *Crew* membership can simultaneously produce a sense of admiration amongst certain members of the wider youth population, who at times speak of *Crew* exploits in terms of near awe. More tightly regulated by their parents and neighbours, such young people's approval of *Crew* behaviours serves to offer them symbolic ties to the heady thrills of street life that they must experience in a more muted and secretive manner, if at all.

Additionally, there are existential benefits to membership of *The Crew*, where shared experiences of personal adversity cease to be a mark of disadvantage, but a commonality. The insults of their



more secure contemporaries can be neutralised. To achieve this, an oppositional street culture takes on an important role as an alternative interpretative logic. Their insulters can be denigrated as ‘rats’ – allies of the state and the hated police, not the kind of rugged, self-sufficient man *Crew* members understand it is important to be. The tough demeanour demanded by their street culture ensures that each individual is discouraged from reflecting on or discussing the pain they have experienced. In solidarity, they are insulated not just against their community’s detractors but also from any brimming over of personal grief. This became clear on one occasion shortly after the funeral of Mano and Adam’s grandfather whom the two brothers had cared for greatly. When Macker fails to engage Mano in humorous banter he inquires of the young men present: ‘why’s he in such a piss (bad mood)?’

The dove-tailing of *Crew* membership and street cultural identity continued as the friendship group developed with initial members being joined by the others arriving from other parts of Dublin. The group’s forays into mischievous play and occasional theft solidified into the routinised patterns of acquisitive entrepreneurialism and ritualised excitement-seeking that characterises their activities. Group membership dynamics operate to enforce a street cultural orientation and continuing participation in offending behaviours. *Crew* members are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the group and a failure to do so or to press one’s own interests ahead of the collective’s is ostensibly taboo and open to challenge:

Macker asks Wacker if he remembers the other night when they were rallying, that he ‘legged it’.

Wacker: ‘Yeah, I nearly forgot about that, ya little slíbhín cunt.<sup>ii</sup> Where did you run off to?’

Macker: ‘I went down *Folk Street* after yis but couldn’t find yis.’

Wacker: 'Yeah right, ya little fucken slíbhín, you were off for yerself' (Extract from fieldnotes).

Here, a simple failure to remain with the rest of the group while they were joyriding became the basis for derision. As Paul Willis demonstrated, the adherence to oppositional cultures is a key process in reproducing disadvantage (1977). *Crew* membership provides particular 'securities' but demands in return behaviours that distance the young men from a position of greater social inclusion. The imperative to participate in offending acts is enforced by effeminising insults levelled against those who fail to do so, e.g. 'ya handbag'. Equally important, the division of spoils from the sale of stolen goods is apportioned based on contributing to the act of theft, handling and trading. Disputes over roles played and spoils deserved are common. As such, the ability to act as an arbiter of reality, which itself stems from the ability to appropriately apply wit and violent potential, is an important aspect of one's position within *The Crew's* constantly shifting hierarchy. The group's fluid nature, the qualities demanded of its members and its volatile internal relations all call for an ability to exhibit street cultural acumen.

Understanding the biography of *The Crew* group necessitates revisiting existing accounts of offending peer group formation. In this regard, Thrasher's initial definition of the gang: 'an interstitial group formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict' (1927: 46) provides enduring explanatory currency. The nature of the conflicts faced by the kind of disadvantaged young people he studied, however, has arguably changed in nature. For Thrasher, it was conflict between groups of rival young people and with the police that served to crystallise gang identity. For the St Louis gang members studied by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) it was the presence of violent threat embodied by gangs from local or rival areas that prompted a wide range of disadvantaged youth to join the gang and participate in its lifestyle. This notion is reiterated in the contemporary British context by John Pitts whose 'reluctant gangsters' seek a degree of safety through gang membership in a street world replete with physical threats (2008). The case of *The Crew*, however, prompts a

different understanding of disadvantaged youth groups in the inner-city, no longer necessarily a readily identifiable space of socio-economic exclusion.

As I have set out elsewhere (Ilan, 2011) Dublin's inner-city during the economic boom became a contested space, where the vestiges of a 200 year old slum culture met the homogenising forces of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom: intertwining the socio-economic character of urban neighbourhoods with thriving commerce, rising land values and shifting community identities. *Northstreet* community leaders became concerned with presenting their area as physically and normatively renewed. Ostensibly outlying groups such as *The Crew* become ideal targets in a symbolic crusade to represent the space as 'crime-free'. Thus for these young men, the threat they experience is more ephemeral at times than physical and immediate. It stems from a lack of a fixed and stable community of their own and their experiences of micro-exclusion and humiliation at the hands of their new neighbours. Such as they exist, the physical threats they face in terms of inter-personal violence are present even within their own fluid youth offending group (as demonstrated by the opening vignette). There are risks inherent in travelling through areas in which they are not known. This is acknowledged, but as it will become clear, a focus is placed on forging acquaintances rather than stoking up interstitial conflict. Competing conflict gangs are symptomatic of the solid city, whereas, it will become clear that the city *The Crew* inhabits is more liquid.

### **Street crime and territorial mobility**

The vignette below represents approximately an hour in the presence of *The Crew*, who in this short period of time 'hang around' their local estate, move through adjoining private spaces and various public housing estates, then into the city centre. All the while, they are attuned for potential earning opportunities and casually negotiate the presence of others. Interestingly, their final destination is in an opposite area of the city:

The Crew are hanging around outside *The Club*. Macker and Byrnesy are having a conversation I can only partially hear, discussing the possible theft of a phone from a teacher at the vocational training centre they begrudgingly attend (albeit irregularly). They look at passing cars fairly intently for a few moments nearly expecting to see the teacher. The lads

discuss a number of issues including the case of a group of young men from elsewhere in the inner city who were caught by the Gardaí in a stolen car in the country. They speak of them with a certain admiration and Byrnesy suggests that it would be a buzz to steal cars in order to attend court hearings out of county.

One of them 'has' a bike [i.e. identified it as possible to steal], so they set off to see it. They walk a few minutes to a parked moped and examine it intently, 'Go on, get this bike' says one, but it won't be easy, there are a lot of cars on the road and they are still a bit nervous about the phone. They abandon their plans and continue. Down a lane there are new private apartments complete with CCTV cameras which they leave alone and elect instead to investigate the back of a block of offices. Without incident, they proceed towards the shops of the city centre. We continue through another set of flats, Macker speaks to two slightly older men (approximately 19) out of earshot. Money and something else I can't see changes hands. They banter briefly before Macker runs forward to rejoin the group.

As we continue into the city centre, there are several parked cars and vans lining the street. The boys peer through windows and test doors. They are shouting and laughing, this seems to be very much a play experience to them, this is made more apparent when they spy an electronic shutter rising and Macker and Wacker grab hold of it to be carried up. A man walks by and tells them to get off it: 'Fuck off ya cunt,' Wacker mutters quietly. Dommer holds open the doors to an apartment block when a resident walks through. A number of the group quickly run in. They come down a few minutes later. We move on and reach the city centre. Getting to a set of bike racks, they search for a likely candidate to steal but are unable to find one. As we continue the lads attempt to discourage me from following, telling me that I'll earn a criminal record... They see some black-clad skater youths around their age. Byrnesy asks Wacker: 'We rob them poshies [middle class people]?' Wacker smiles, but they pass them by and walk on a little further. I am told to leave at this stage: 'We're going to [area of the city a relatively short distance away by now] to make some money' Dommer informs me, and it is clear that I am just going to be in the way (extract from fieldnotes).

Observation and conversation with *Crew* members over the course of fieldwork revealed that violent neighbourhood rivalry played a relatively small role in their everyday life. Evidence of the 'territoriality' reported by Kintrea et al. (2008) in Britain where ritualised violent conflict constrain mobility and solidifies opposing local identities was extremely limited. Instead, as demonstrated above, *Crew* members move through urban space with speed, confidence and propriety, both in

private areas, potentially rival housing estates and public shopping districts. In interview Philo, who has lived in several different parts of the city, explains that violence used against him is usually brought on by a failure to respect street cultural rules and hierarchies:

‘Scars everywhere... Just from fucken me thinking I was hard and challenging the wrong people... treading on the wrong toes... Buying hash off them and not paying them for it, buying hash off them and smoking it in front of them and telling them you’re not going to pay them’.

While Philo briefly mentions his presence in less familiar parts of the city as one of the triggers for the initiation of violence, he dedicates more time to listing his provocative behaviours, including his sale of hash in various areas where local dealers evidently did not appreciate his incursions.

Nevertheless, Philo, through his membership of the *Crew* group, demonstrates that he can form networks with peers in new parts of the city and avoid violent confrontation where he successfully manages to remain sufficiently deferent to those with greater street cultural cache.

In terms of the wider group, there is but one housing estate close to *Northstreet* housing a cohort of young men with whom *Crew* members reported experiencing some kind of territorial enmity. Interestingly, however, it appeared that ‘territorial’ lines are confined to the respective estates themselves and not surrounding streets. Entering into ‘rival territory’ was reflexively undertaken on rare occasions with the express purpose of fighting. *Crew* members reported doing so traditionally on Halloween every year, while Adam reports that their opposite peer group would enter *Northstreet* very occasionally to fight. Adam, however, explains that whilst some of his friends will facilitate the exchange of violence, he personally does not. Mano indeed offers an explanation of this rivalry as a sole and minor restriction on their mobility, as much as anything a product of personal antipathies and ultimately of minor consequence:

J: ‘So can you tell us about the fights? What happens?’

M: 'Use anything you can pick up, depends on what they do, if they pick up wood, we'll pick up wood. That's what it majorly is, hating each other. Like if people from [estate], start hatin' us, we're gonna start getting pissed off, and start after them. You'd get a few digs (blows), after that you'd go over say a few things, get a chase. I don't think anyone has gotten really badly hurt over it'.

J: 'So would you avoid [estate] then?'

M: 'Yeah, except around Halloween then we'd start going in there.'

In comparison to this minor ritualised rivalry, itself reminiscent of 'capture the flag' style play, *Crew* members can be understood to have a very wide degree of geographic mobility. Indeed, they harness their lack of boundaries to actively enhance their key entrepreneurial and thrill seeking activities. Utilising Dublin city centre's position as a public transportation hub, the young men report instances in which they have travelled to more salubrious suburbs. Here they report that they can steal high value power tools from what they feel are less well protected garages and engage in street robbery where middle-class youth attending private schools can be intimidated into parting with their mobile phones. Similarly, whilst the inner-city offers few opportunities to joyride with any level of discretion, Dublin's working-class suburbs are chequered with large green spaces, often some distance from the nearest residences. As previously noted, certain *Crew* members have lived amongst both affluent and less advantaged suburban spaces or at least travelled through them, providing them with the working knowledge necessary to use these areas for their purposes. There is a risk of attracting hostile attention from unknown young men when in alien parts of the city. In this regard, their street cultural identity provides an important resource in terms of intimidating those who exhibit less violent potential, but crucially in providing a shared grammar with other groups of similar young men, with whom *Crew* members may form an advantageous acquaintance. In this interview, Adam explains how acquaintances they made through joyriding in the fields of a particular suburb intervened on their behalf with a third, more hostile group of young men:

J: 'Yeah, tell us a bit more about the lads up in [suburbs] so?'

A: 'I don't know. Some of them are like 16 or 15 or I don't know. They're all sound like. We wouldn't know a lot of them. Just like they'd be big fellahs; they'd like, stick up for ya. Like you know, it'd be, like if someone came up to ya and say we were on a bike and they were there as well, they'd be: "that's my bike get off it". So they'd just tell them to fuck off, get away from them now or you'll get your head kicked in. Like he'd warn them before anything...' (Extract from interview with Adam).

Within the liquid city, where young men travel to advantageous areas for the performance of their offending behaviours, a street cultural identity provides an embodied form of capital which allows them to cement crucial social networks which provide them with security in foreign parts of the urban landscape. This exists equally for young men who wish to associate themselves with *The Crew* in and around *Northstreet*. Where a young man that Adam meets in a care home in the inner-city begins a brief association with *The Crew*, he is able to negotiate a presence through discussing mutual acquaintances in the suburban housing estate that was originally home to Paddy and Macker. By demonstrating compatible opinions about various individuals and situations, and maintaining an appropriate demeanour, he gains a temporary acquaintance which is continuously reviewed.

### **Street social capital in the liquid city**

The nature of such transient and instrumental acquaintances, I suggest, provides an empirical cue to develop the theoretical arguments in the Bourdieuan tradition made by Sveinung Sandberg in relation to 'street capital' (2008a, 2008b). He argues that the traits engendered by embodying street culture provide young men on the socio-economic margins with a 'street capital', facilitating their survival and subsistence within the street field although necessarily interfering with their opportunities to succeed within the mainstream. His convincing model thus articulates the

successful cultivation of street acumen as the acquisition of 'street capital'. Arguably, this could perhaps be understood specifically as 'street cultural capital'. For Sandberg the use of social networks does not seem as central to his analysis, although he does mention the potential ability of a certain section of his participant community to draw on familial networks for support (2008b: 162). With the case of *The Crew*, there is the opportunity to identify the operation of 'street social capital': the resources available to individuals through social networks which allow them to thrive within the street field.

Social networks and/or Bourdieuan notions of capital have been variously used to conceptualise offending behaviours, youth lifestyles and their relationship to space. From a public health perspective, scholars attempt to gauge how social capital can improve outcomes for disadvantaged populations, focusing on: 'civic engagement', 'reciprocity and trust', 'social networks' and 'social support' as factors that can influence the take up of treatment and beneficial behaviours (see Pilkington, 2002 in general and Van Hout, 2010 on the Irish Traveller community). This approach however, does not specifically focus on the particularised forms of social capital that can exist amongst the excluded. In terms of drugs and risk, Mayock demonstrates how norms and narratives circulating within particular social networks in inner-city Dublin allow drug users to 'script' their behaviours as less risky (2005). Social capital has moreover been conceptualised as either communitarian or individualist (see Portes, 1998), where it can provide resources for the benefit of groups or merely particular individuals within them. Pilkington and Sharifullina (2009) suggest that social networks cannot be exclusively conceptualised as spaces of support, but can also be viewed in particular contexts as spaces of exploitation. This notion of the negative outcome generating network resonates with the work of MacDonald et al. (2005) who show that socio-economic excluded, young adults in the North of England gain their sense of inclusion from locally embedded networks which limit geographic and social mobility through links to poor work and housing.



There is a need to understand the ways in which social networks reproduce disadvantage, support criminality and facilitate particular spatial practices. Distinguishing between the 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' fields in which different types of capital might be expended provides a promising theoretical frame through which to better understand lived experiences of exclusion. The impressive Bourdieuan analysis of capital expenditure offered by Barry (2006) conceptualises offending as a resource which can be spent to generate status. Key here is an understanding of the confluence of life stages and fields. Where individuals are younger there are fewer spheres of socio-economic life in which they can expend their competencies and attributes to gain recognition. As they mature, opportunities to do so in the legitimate realm (e.g. work and relationships) increase and thus expending capital in the illegitimate sphere of offending becomes less significant. Whilst this is a convincing explanation of why individuals often desist from offending as they age, it must be recognised that for others, offending careers are more durable. Here a heterodox field and set of norms come into play as young people seek to continue progressing within the street world. MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) view this as progression within particular subcultural street careers (both leisure and economic), which in the case of their participants revolve around specific and limited local networks and spaces.

Where loosely constituted peer offending groups, such as *The Crew*, are networks dedicated to vesting their members with an array of advantageous resources to expend within the street field, 'street social capital' becomes an important phenomenon to consider. The nature of networks can be more or less stable and advantageous depending on the status of, and relationships between its members. They can no doubt be enduring and facilitate high value illegal entrepreneurialism, or in the case of *The Crew*, contested and characterised by transient relationships. Street social capital is predicated on an embodiment of street cultural capital. In other words, in order for an individual to access the benefits of street networks, it is vital that they can operate effectively within the street world. Street networks facilitate the achievement of street cultural imperatives through providing access to markets in contraband and stolen goods (for sale or purchase), access to allies and

protection from violence. The stability and solidity of street networks may determine the degree to which they themselves might become the site of violence and the extent to which competitive displays of street cultural capital are necessary to avoid exploitation/victimisation.

Street social capital can be a resource for those disadvantaged young people whose circumstances call for movement throughout the city. On the other hand, it may be concentrated within highly localised scenes. Arguably, the processes of liquidity described earlier in this article have a key role to play in determining the degree to which street social capital is deployed within and between specific spaces. For those young people in the deindustrialised north of England, the outward flow of capital has arguably characterised their particular form of lived socio-economic exclusion and limited the possibilities for geographic movement. By contrast, a late-modern, metropolitan 'liquid city' has arguably created a considerably more complex spatial environment which disadvantaged young men on its socio-economic periphery must navigate in a more fluid manner:

'The binary language of social exclusion fundamentally misunderstands the nature of late modernity. Here is a world where borders blur, where cultures cross over, hybridise and merge, where cultural globalisation breaks down, where virtual communities lose their strict moorings to space and locality. The late modern city is one of blurred boundaries, it was the Fordist city of modernity which had a segregated structure, a division of labour of specialised areas, a Chicago of concentric rings. Now the lines blur: gentrification occurs in the inner city – deviance occurs in the suburbs' (Young, 2007: 31-2).

As demonstrated earlier, *The Crew* do not experience a solid city of community solidarity, localised roots and identity with well defined and delineated zones of differentiation. To them, Dublin is a liquid, porous city offering little mooring to their lives, where the line between 'their' space and others' is blurred, and where their street culture is a greater defining feature of their identity than the streets in which they grew up or now live. The principal engines of this spatial practice are the status of their families' housing and/or the vicissitudes of the care system, coupled with changing

constellations of social exclusion within Dublin's 'inner-city', itself now arguably subsumed within the conceptually opposite 'city centre'. Using Bauman's notion of 'liquid modernity' (2000) it is possible to understand traditionally solid social entities (including the city) as 'melting', their once solid structures now flowing in previously unrecognisable patterns. The 'zone of transition' once identified by the Chicago School is now fragmented and dispersed, occupying flat complexes and peripheral housing estates, private dwellings rented by the state, hostels, care homes, detention centres and shelters dispersed amongst various parts of the city. Former 'slumlands' are now gentrified or indeed reflexively reconstructed as renewed. Areas of concentrated disadvantage, of course, continue to exist, but there is a need to theoretically articulate the consequences of the increasingly liquid urban environment for young men at the socio-economic periphery.

The fluid constitution of certain offending youth groups and their spatial flows vest them with a 'vagueness' which does not sit well with traditional conceptions of the solid city (see Carney and Miller, 2009). Indeed, subcultural and excluded groups occupy the cracks, fissures and fault lines of the late-modern city in manners which accord to their own culturally mediated goals (see Hayward, 2004). It becomes necessary to move beyond conceptualisations of 'street gangs' defending the spaces they symbolically claim and occupy through performing street culture. Instead, it must be recognised that there will be young people who perform street culture so as to move through urban space of less determinate character and disadvantaged spaces that are not so obliquely claimed.

As de Certeau (1984) argues, power explicitly determines the relationship that groups have with space. Elites may adopt 'strategies' which are the consequence of their ability to define the use of space and its relations with those external to it. The marginalised, however, are left with 'tactics' – a range of actions rooted in time not space and thus inherently more temporary and ephemeral:

'In our societies, as local stabilities break down, it is as if, no longer fixed by a circumscribed community, tactics wander of orbit, making consumers into immigrants in a system too vast

to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it. But these tactics introduce a Brownian movement into the system' (de Certeau, 1984: xx).

Facing both marginalisation from the wider socio-economic structure and the immediate surrounds of their community of residence, *The Crew* are cast adrift to wander the liquid city, their 'solutions' to their predicament precipitate their mobility. Their movements are a product of their biographies in that their roots are diffuse and their histories of enforced geographic mobility provide a more expansive lived map of the city. Their opportunities to gain financial independence, pleasurable sensations and a sense of respect, all key aspects of street culture, are all affected by their mobility. Ultimately, a lack of power is evident in their circumstances as they navigate a life whose immediate practicalities are often dictated to them by housing authorities, markets or the care system. What they retain is the ability to enact tactics, to turn mobility into an advantage, or to convert street cultural capital to street social capital in order to gain the benefits of fluid offending peer group membership in different parts of the city.

Drawing on Putnam (1995), street networks embedded within specific localities have been seen as producing a 'bonding capital', linked to a solidarity, that assists members in 'getting by' (subsisting) but limiting their ability to 'get on' (socio-economically advance) (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001: 2105 cited in MacDonald et al., 2005: 884). The existence of such networks, however, require some kind of enduring power over local spaces and the prevalence of an inclusive ethos at the micro/community level. By contrast, the variety of street social capital utilised by *The Crew* is of the 'bridging' variety, facilitating their movement and advantageous interactions at the level of space, but nevertheless reducing their ability to advance socio-economically. Indeed, street bridging capital reinforces socio-economic exclusion all the more, given that it operates where marginalisation also occurs at the local level and there is nothing but the most temporary and fleeting power over space. Indeed, insecurity is a particular characteristic of liquid late-modernity (Young, 2007). Clearly thus, power is key to understanding the late-modern spatial practices of disadvantaged urban youth.

However configured, these support street cultural values and practices which ultimately reinforce and escalate experiences of marginalisation.

Through its emphasis on biography this article has demonstrated the importance of understanding lived experience, the particularly localised and nuanced variants of which will dictate the manner in which various forms of street capital are expended to achieve necessary spatial ends. I would argue that Hallsworth and Young's (2008) description of street life as 'rhizomatic' offers considerable conceptual purchase here. Street life in the liquid city is not always amenable to the stable structures and hierarchies of the traditionally conceived street gang, nor the well defined spaces of the solid city. As opposed to relying on established discourse, there is a need to instead consider the specificities of particular networks of excluded urban youth and the manner in which street social capital is generated and expended. Indeed, this approach provides opportunities to understand the spatial practices of various disadvantaged groups in a range of global contexts.

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<sup>i</sup> All people and street names used in this article are false in order to protect the identity of participants.

<sup>ii</sup> Insult derived from Irish language denoting an untrustworthy person.