

Love without a home: a portrait of romantic and couple relationships among street-involved young adults in Montreal

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Few studies have explored love relationships among street-involved young adults. Unstructured interviews were conducted with 42 street-involved young adults, aged between 18 and 32 years (mean age = 23), about their love and sexual life. Themes were identified in the interviews with their corresponding kernels of meaning, and these kernels of meaning were then grouped into conceptual categories on the basis of their conceptual proximity. Five main conceptual categories emerged: (1) past relationships get in the way; (2) a romantic view of love dominates; (3) love is not always the main or the only motivation; (4) romance and the street do not mix well; and (5) hoping for love when the present seems dark. The interviews suggest that although there are many challenges facing the love life of street-involved young adults, love relationships can also contribute positively to the identity of these people by helping them to look at themselves differently and to consider alternatives to life on the street.

Keywords: street-involved youth; homeless; youth; love; sexuality; qualitative study

Introduction

Few studies have explored love relationships among street-involved young adults. Research into this population focuses primarily on epidemiological aspects such as the prevalence of sexually transmissible and blood-borne infections (Roy *et al.* 2003, Boivin *et al.* 2005, Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC] 2006, Benoit *et al.* 2007), of condom use (Ennett *et al.* 1999, PHAC 2006) and of prostitution (Roy *et al.* 2003, Weber *et al.* 2004, PHAC 2006). The available research nevertheless makes it possible to deduce that a majority of street-involved young people are single (70–94%; Ennett *et al.* 1999, Fournier 2001, Lussier *et al.* 2002, Loates and Walsh 2010). For some, single status reflects a desire to break a cycle of domination, violence and abuse that marks their relations, both with their parents and with their love partners (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Laporte *et al.* 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007, Pourette and Oppenchain 2007, Smith 2008, Jamouille 2009). As well, precarious living conditions, both residential and economic, are not very conducive to the development of a love relationship (Jamouille 2009). Arranging to meet, telephoning each other and maintaining contact are true challenges in a context of constant mobility (Côté 1989).

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There are also obstacles related to the perception that young people have of themselves and to the stigmatisation of their status. Many of those interviewed felt that they have nothing to offer a partner and that they had to resolve some personal issues before being able to engage in a romantic relationship (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Levac and Labelle 2007, Watson 2011). Oppenchain *et al.* (2010) described people who experience homelessness who have certain passivity with regards to their emotional and sexual experiences because of the stigma associated with street life. They described a lack of desire or an inability to love and be loved, attributing these to a painful past and a loss of self-esteem (see also Laporte *et al.* 2007, Pourette and Oppenchain 2007).

Relationships on the street are said to be marked by mistrust reinforced by the tendency of these individuals to hide their vulnerability or their precarious living conditions by false pretences (Côté 1989) or by self-presentation strategies that aim to maximise the social and material goals of the relationships (Banaji and Prentice 1994). The possibility of becoming attached to someone is perceived by some as a threat to survival on the street, since this attachment means making themselves vulnerable to another person, giving that person some power over them and giving up part of their hard-won autonomy. The context of uncertainty implies that anyone who maintains a dependency relationship cannot survive in this environment without exposing himself or herself to abuse (Côté 1989). The importance given to using drugs and selling drugs also seems to be a difficulty often mentioned by street-involved young people as an obstacle to developing romantic relationships (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Levac and Labelle 2007), building on the mistrust that is already present.

Some street-involved young people nevertheless report having romantic experiences. They describe these experiences as being generally brief (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Levac and Labelle 2007), ranging from one day to eight years, with a median of two months for young men and five months for young women (Moon *et al.* 2001). Romantic relationships are often punctuated by periods of absence and reunion due to mobility, the frequent moving typical of street life or stays in institutions (rehabilitation or detox centres, prison, etc.; Côté 1989, Lussier and Poirier 2000, Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007).

Various motivations for engaging in relationships as a couple are reported by street-involved people, such as filling an emotional void (Levac and Labelle 2007), breaking isolation (Kidd 2003, Kidd and Davidson 2007), enhancing self-esteem (Kidd and Davidson 2007), helping to remain in a positive frame of mind and providing a sense of stability (Watson 2011), finding economic and psychological support (Kidd 2003, Wesely and Wright 2005, Loates and Walsh 2010, Rayburn and Corzine 2010, Watson 2011) and protection from the dangers of living on the street (mostly young women; Ensign 2000, Kidd and Davidson 2007, Smith 2008, Jamouille 2009, Watson 2011). Emotional and opportunistic motivations (Côté 1989, Pourette and Oppenchain 2007, Jamouille 2009) are present and the precariousness of street life seems to exacerbate their intricacy. These observations echo the profile of active management of love experiences among those whose life on the street is qualified as 'voluntary' by Oppenchain *et al.* (2010). They choose their partners both from among the people who experience homelessness and from among members of society, according to their desires and the benefits they expect and they refuse to be labelled as homeless.

Research on the factors associated with romantic relationships of street-involved youths show contradictory results. On the positive side, young people engaging in

romantic relationships report a decrease in drug use (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999a, Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007), higher self-esteem, a decrease in hostile behaviour, greater psychological well-being (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999a) and an increased motivation to get off the street (Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007). For others, these relationships bring unfortunate consequences: a sense of exclusion (Wesely and Wright 2005), increased drug use (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999b), unprotected sex (Moon *et al.* 2001), anxiety and depression (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999a), stress (Kidd and Kral 2002), suicide attempts (Kidd and Kral 2002) and physical and psychological violence (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Salomon *et al.* 2002, Rayburn and Corzine 2010, Slesnick *et al.* 2010). For many young people living on the street, the quest for love thus goes on in a context of rejection that echoes difficult relationships with parents (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Levac and Labelle 2007, Jamouille 2009). This succinct portrait suggests that romantic relationships are a major concern for people living on the street, including young adults, even if some of them choose to avoid such experiences. Their intimate relationships and the nature of these relationships are not all the same. However, they are subject to common precarious life conditions and social processes that are hypothesised to play a role in their love relationships.

From a theoretical perspective, this article is concerned with the social processes shaping love in modern societies and the frames through which street-involved people describe themselves in these relationships. The organisation of family and marriage has been profoundly affected by social processes such as detraditionalisation (Thompson 1996) and individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996). As a consequence, intimacy is now described in terms of auto-reference (Luhmann 1998), pure relationship (Giddens 1992) or as 'its own and only reason and purpose' (Bauman 2003). In other words, it is largely freed from traditional constraints and modern love tolerates no other motivation than love itself, in which sexuality and desire play a predominant role. The ideal type of modern love is characterised by commitment and self-disclosure (Giddens 1992, Luhmann 1998) as well as a quest for personal satisfaction (Bauman 2003). Bauman (2003) argues that social relations are replaced by contact networks tight enough to meet certain needs (including security) but at the same time loose enough to be periodically abandoned, so as not to miss opportunities for greater satisfaction. The same is supposed to apply to love in detraditionalised societies.

In addition, Hakim (2010) argues, individualised modern societies emphasise erotic capital, defined as 'a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of one's society' (p. 501) and it interacts with other forms of capital (symbolic, economic, cultural and social). If the 'symbolic burden of the homeless' is generally associated with a lack of capital (Farrugia 2011), erotic capital, to our knowledge, has not been studied among street-involved people.

Nowadays, one searches for confirmation of one's own individuality – feelings, beliefs, choices, actions, etc. – in one's personal relationships (Luhmann 1998). In this context, it is not surprising that love and sexuality are thought to be central in the subject-formation in modern society. In this article, we hypothesise that the characteristics of the ideal type of modern love are the frames through which they find confirmation of their individuality and self-worth. The objectives of this article are to draw a portrait of romantic relationships of young adults living on the street in Montreal from their points of view, to explore the frames through which street-involved people describe it and to examine how the social processes shaping love in

modern societies play a role in the development and maintenance of these relationships.

Method

Participants

Data for this article are drawn from individual unstructured interviews conducted with street-involved young adults in a study examining love, sex and intimate relationships among them. Street experiences range from youths spending considerable amounts of time on the street and extensive involvement in the street lifestyle to others having a place to live but choosing to spend a great deal of time on the street and to participate to varying degrees in the street lifestyle (Kelly and Caputo 2007). The term 'street-involved' is used in this article to include these various precarious living situations and degrees of involvement in the street lifestyle. Despite this heterogeneity of experiences among street-involved people, they have in common the fact of living in insecure conditions characterised by precarious food acquisitions, shelter, income and health (Dachner and Tarasuk 2002).

Three criteria were used to identify the group under study: (1) being 18 years of age or older; (2) being without a place to sleep at least once in the past year; and, (3) having used resources for street-involved young people at least once during the past year. All the participants were recruited between October 2007 and April 2009 through various resources for street-involved young people of Greater Montreal and using snowball sampling (the young people we met were also asked to suggest recruitment to friends and acquaintances of their age also experiencing homelessness). The volunteer participants were interviewed in depth for about an hour. The semi-structured interviews addressed the following dimensions: (1) depictions of love and of romantic experiences (How do you experience love and romantic relationships? How important are they to you?); (2) depictions of sexuality and sexual experiences (How do you experience sexuality in the street context? How important is it to you?); (3) depictions of the street and interpersonal relationships in the street context (How do you experience life in the street? How would you describe your relationships with other people in the street?); and (4) depictions of the future (How do you see yourself in the future? What are your hopes?). Probing questions were added as necessary.

The final sample consists of 42 street-involved young adults interviewed in person (18 women, 24 men) aged 18–32 years (mean and median age of 23; standard deviation = 3.6). They became street-involved at ages ranging from 13 to 23 (mean age of 17; standard deviation = 1.9). Time spent living on the street varies (3 months–16 years) and was often interspersed with periods during which young people lived in apartments. At the time of the interviews, 15 young people were in a couple relationship (11 women, 4 men), and 27 were single (7 women, 20 men). A majority of participants (30) described themselves as heterosexual. Fourteen men reported sexual relationships with same-sex partners, although mainly in the context of prostitution or survival sex (where sex is exchanged for money, food, shelter, drugs or protection; Greene *et al.* 1999). Four of them described themselves as bisexual and two as homosexual; four were questioning their sexual orientation. Seven women also reported same-sex relationships; only two of them described themselves as

bisexual or pansexual, and none as homosexual. The vast majority (39) of the participants were Caucasian born in Canada. Three participants were born outside of Canada: one female participant was South-American; one male participant was Haitian and another was African.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed the two steps of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation proposed by Tesch (1990). In the first phase of the analysis, segmentation of interviews led to the identification of themes and kernels of meaning (de-contextualisation) using NVivo 8 (QSR 2008). Kernels of meaning are expressions, syntagms or sentences reflecting a similar opinion or meaning associated with a given theme. In the second phase of the analysis, these kernels of meaning were grouped into conceptual categories on the basis of their conceptual proximity (re-contextualisation). These categories are succinct, analytical descriptions that capture as accurately as possible the sub-categories and the general orientation of the associated kernels of meaning. As a validation procedure, all authors agreed on the final categorisation presented here. The numbers in parentheses presented in the text indicate the number of different interviews in which the category referred to was found. They are used to estimate the coverage of the specific themes among the participants and to compare their coverage among subgroups of participants when relevant, mainly according to sex, time spent living on the street and relationship status.

Ethical issues

This study received ethical approval from the research ethic board of the Université du Québec à Montréal. The free and informed consent of young people was ensured by way of a consent form, which was read, discussed and signed with the participant. To ensure anonymity, participants chose a pseudonym. Each participant received compensation of \$30.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Although in-depth interviews were seen as the best choice to attain the objectives of the study, the interview technique is subject to social desirability and memory biases. Complementary techniques such as observation would have helped minimise these biases and improve results validity. The sample consists of young adults who are involved with support agencies. Consequently, they are in an environment where they have access to resources for help and can benefit from greater social integration than that of homeless people who do not seek help. The composition of the sample is very heterogeneous in terms of street experiences. While this study provides a more diversified representation of what street-involved young adults state about love and about their interaction where love is concerned, it has its limitations regarding more detailed study of certain subgroups, such as youths who experience prostitution. Furthermore, the narrow ethnic and sexual diversity of this sample prevents subgroups comparison on this basis.

Findings

Table 1 presents the five main conceptual categories and the subcategories that emerged from the analysis: (1) past relationships get in the way; (2) a romantic view of love dominates; (3) love is not always the main or the only motivation; (4) romance and the street do not mix well; (5) hoping for love when the present seems dark. Direct quotations are provided in the text so as to present the view of participants.

Past relationships get in the way (16)

Slightly more than a third of participants (15) reported that their past experience with family and love interests compromised their ability to love and be loved. They describe family environments where neglect, abandonment, drug use and extramarital affairs were frequent:

My mother abandoned me, my parents abandoned me. Love and all that stuff, it hurt when I was young. So, after that, it wasn't necessarily my fault that I reacted [by using drugs]. (Jack, age 25)

Only one (1) participant, a young man, spoke positively about his family. He believes that the importance he today places on fidelity was transmitted to him by his parents.

A romantic view of love dominates (34)

A romantic view of love emerges from a majority (34) of the testimonials. The conception of a magical love that is meant to last is increasingly the consensus among young people who have been street involved for less than a year. Those who have been on the street longer do not describe an idealised romantic representation of love, suggesting that their view is transformed as a result of love being put to the test in the street context.

Essential characteristics for succeeding as a couple (32)

Most participants (32) identify characteristics considered essential to a successful couple relationship. The characteristics cited are most often having points in common (same character, same interests, same activities, same experience, going in the same direction; 17), reciprocity and mutual support (16), honesty, trust and authenticity (14), concern for others, respect, attentiveness and kindness (10), as well as the importance of communication in building a love relationship (10). Communication refers to the content transmitted (self-disclosure and its difficulties) as well as to processes such as listening to the other person's needs, looking for compromise and using humour. Some young people (9) also emphasised the importance of acceptance, of making an effort to understand the other person and of not wanting to change or judge others – all the more so because they say that in the street environment they often see infidelity, theft, violence and insecurity.

Some young people (9) state that love starts building from the moment they feel good about themselves: '[...] To be able to love someone else, you have to love

Table 1. Conceptual categories and sub-categories.

(1) Past relationships get in the way (16)	(2) A romantic view of love dominates (34)	(3) Love is not always the main or the only motivation (37)	(4) Romance and the street do not mix well (42)	(5) Hoping for love when the present seems dark (35)
<p>Past experience with family and love interests compromised the ability to love and be loved (15)</p> <p>Only one participant speak positively about his family (1)</p>	<p><i>Essential characteristics for succeeding as a couple (32)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having points in common (17) ● Reciprocity and mutual support (16) ● Honesty, trust and authenticity (14) ● Concern for others (10) ● Communication (10) ● Acceptance (9) ● Feeling good about themselves (9) ● Being faithful (5) <p><i>Magical, intangible love, a love meant to last (20)</i></p>	<p><i>Varied, numerous, and generally brief couple relationships that can be positive (34)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Love can be the driving force behind positive, lasting relationships (23) ● Positive connections can last beyond the breakup (8) <p><i>Motivation where love is not always a factor (33)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The need to survive (22) ● Pleasure, and physical attraction (21) ● The search for psychological and emotional support (14) <p><i>Love relationships that initiate a change in their lives and that give hope (23)</i></p>	<p><i>Street life gets in the way of romantic relationships (39)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Drug hampered the ability to invest in a love relationship (30) ● Survival strategies led to doubt the partner's sincerity (28) ● Being a street-involved youth is unattractive and stigmatising (15) ● Precarious situation is an obstacle to establishing love relationships (14) <p><i>Challenges are inherent to love, but they are exacerbated on the street (38)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incompatibility (30) ● Infidelity (29) ● Violence (16) ● Emotional dependency (14) ● Communication difficulties (13) ● The rush to engage in romantic relationships increases the risk of failure (11) 	<p><i>In the short term, the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of failure in love (27)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Suffering resulting from a breakup tend to perpetuate a cycle of failure in love (24) ● Pessimistic depictions about their love relationships on the whole (7) <p><i>The importance, in the longer term, of stable love and family life (26)</i></p> <p><i>Love requires making changes in order to love better (13)</i></p>

yourself (Paul, age 25)'. Finally, some participants (5) report that being faithful is essential to maintaining a love relationship.

Magical, intangible love, a love meant to last (20)

Approximately half of the participants (20) define love as being magical, intangible and meant to last. For these young people, love especially refers to well-being, kindness and safety. It should be noted that these young people are the ones who spent the least time on the street:

[Love is] when you feel good with a person. . . It's when you are able to live with someone without any crap. You are able to help each other without having to ask. . . I don't know, I don't really have a definition, it's just when you feel it's the right person. (Émilie, age 18)

Love is not always the main or the only motivation (37)

Most participants reported varied, numerous and generally brief couple relationships where love was not always the main motivation.

Varied, numerous and generally brief couple relationships that can be positive (34)

The relationships described by the young adults varied in number and duration, lasting from a few weeks to a few months in most cases. Slightly more than half of participants (23), virtually all in a couple relationship, attested to the fact that love can be the driving force behind positive, lasting relationships:

I've had many romances with street people. I had many, but not really meaningful ones. I loved them all, but it did not last long. I had my first boyfriend when I was 18; it was on the street. And I've had plenty of others . . . I don't know how many! Relationships on the street don't last long. (Amélie, age 20)

For some (8), the positive connections can last beyond the breakup. The ex-partners fit into a broader socialising and support network; for example, some young people reported staying on good terms and being able to spend the night at their ex-partner's place: 'we kept in touch, sometimes we even slept together (Anne, age 20)'. These positive aspects were mentioned mostly by young women.

Motivation where love is not always a factor (33)

Three main reasons can be drawn from their personal accounts. First, the need to survive was a motivation stated by approximately half (22) of participants to explain the establishment of intimate relationships. In these cases, entering into a love relationship is described as a strategy for sharing a partner's resources such as food, shelter, money, protection and safety from the threats of street life:

For me it was protection from being attacked or raped when I went to sleep at night on the street. That's why I always had sex on the street, to not be alone when I was asleep. . . (Amélie, age 20)

Second, sex, pleasure and physical attraction are reasons given by approximately half (21) of the young adults. Moreover, some of them said they had sexual relations simply because they were attracted to their partner, without being in love with him or her. Almost as many women as men (11 men and 10 women) stated this was the case for them:

She wasn't really my style, it was really more that I hadn't had sex with a girl for a long time ... a year since I had sex with my ex-girlfriend. (Sébastien, age 19)

Third, one third of young adults interviewed (14) mentioned the search for psychological and emotional support as motivation. Regardless of the presence of a feeling of love, these partnerships help young people to feel valued and confident, to manage their aggressiveness and to break the isolation. It is less a question of material support than of psychological and emotional support to help get through the precarious living conditions of street life:

When I went out with these people, when I was on the street, it was mostly to not feel so alone. It was not for the right reasons. (Benoît, age 27)

Love relationships that initiate a change in their lives and that give hope (23)

For slightly more than half of participants (23), love relationships were also an opportunity to make changes in their lives; or they were a source of hope. For many, especially women (14 women versus 7 men), a love relationship was a source of support to quit using drugs, to get off the street, or to stop prostituting themselves:

[My boyfriend] is very supportive. I had already stopped using drugs before I met him. It's just that he helps me to keep on track. (Lili, age 24)

A love breakup also sometimes opens their eyes to their personal problems and triggers a life change. For example, some young women have stopped dancing nude in erotic bars and others started to seek respect for their limits by refusing to accept intimate partner violence. Some male participants no longer wanted to be afraid to interact with girls and others, both male and female, decided to be more committed in a future relationship.

Romance and the street do not mix well (42)

All of the participants described obstacles to love and reasons for romantic relationships breaking up. These findings attest to experience that contradicts the idealised vision of love described by these young people and present a tension between hopes, desire and the reality of the conditions of their lives.

Street life gets in the way of romantic relationships (39)

Almost all participants (39) identified conditions of street life that do not promote the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. Drug is cited as one of the most influential factors on romantic relationships in the street. While some participants (17) reported that drug use creates opportunities for meeting a love

partner, most of them (30) feel that drug use and trafficking, whether their own involvement or that of their partner, hampered their ability to invest in a love relationship or led to conflicts with their partner. They described situations where drug use by them or their partner was more important than the relationship itself, particularly because of the dependency it caused: 'It's me [who left her], I was more in love with my coke than with her. . . (André, age 22)'. They also report situations where drug addiction changed their behaviour or that of their partner, or led to uncontrollable emotional reactions that contributed to the breakup of the relationship:

My girlfriend left me. She saw that drugs were more important than her. At the time, it was true. It was more important than anything for me. It was more important than me. I lived to get high and I got high to live . . . When you are high, you don't think about love. You just think about yourself and your next fix. (Paul, age 25)

A majority of participants (28) also state that survival strategies encouraged by the difficult conditions of street life, such as prostitution and exploitation of love relationships, led them to doubt their partner's sincerity. They suspect their partners of hypocrisy and opportunism, and they feel betrayed and used, suggesting a pervasive tension in their love relationship between the longing to be with someone and the fear of being exploited:

When I started living on the street, I was really disillusioned about love [. . .] Living on the street is so unhealthy, so destructive. It's me, myself and I and you trust no one. Everyone is rotten. (Benoit, age 27)

Slightly more than a third of participants (15), mainly young men (12 men versus 3 women) believe that being a street-involved youth and a drug user is unattractive and stigmatising. This depiction is also more widespread among young adults who are starting a life on the street. They say they avoid frequenting partners who have this stigma. They also try to hide from potential partners their life on the street or their drug use, or at least to minimise its visibility. Two self-presentation strategies to achieve this and minimise the risk of rejection are (1) lying to hide this status and (2) using certain financial means to distract from or compensate for their street involvement:

When I meet a girl, I don't tell her that I am on the street, forget it, she'll turn around and get someone else who has some cash . . . If you're on the street, it's because you have no cash. I tell her that in the summer, I sell drugs. (Sébastien, age 19)

A third of young adults (14) feel that their precarious situation is an obstacle to establishing love relationships. They speak of having no fixed address to anchor a love relationship, of the need to survive that relegates love and sexual concerns to second place and of the disturbing and dangerous nature of living on the street. This context arouses both their suspicion of others and the suspicion of them by others:

[I have not been] in love with a capital "I" . . . When I was on the street, my brain was racing at 100 miles an hour, I had to think of everything all the time! I don't have a cigarette, I don't have any money, I don't have food, I don't have a roof over my head. . .

I don't have time to take care of a girlfriend on top of that. (André, age 22)
[My lover] was a liar . . . He lied about everything, about his entire life: he pretended to be part of a music band about to leave for a summer tour around the US, Mexico and Canada. He couldn't stop lying. (Emilie, age 18)

Challenges are inherent to love, but they are exacerbated on the street (38)

Beyond the conditions of street life that make it difficult to have love relationships, most young adults (38) also talk about challenges that are not specific to street involvement:

I think that deep down, everybody, everybody would like to be in love and have a healthy sex life. I don't think there is anyone who doesn't want that. I think everybody wants that, but I think there are many obstacles. (Charles, age 31)

The vast majority of participants (30), particularly young women, cited various forms of incompatibility, such as different goals for the relationship and for the future, different life paths, different socio-economic backgrounds, or dissimilar needs, values or leisure interests. Sometimes life paths differ over time, especially because of physical separations caused by time spent in institutions (depending on their age and their difficulties, prison, drop-in centres, drug rehabilitation centres) or because of the geographical distance when people move or travel abroad. The young people interviewed also indicated that being in contact, too seldom or too often, especially because of the conditions of street life where they spend all day together, are reasons for the decline in love relationships:

At first, we had a great time, it was fun, but now we often fight . . . I think it's because we're together all the time . . . We beg and squeegee together, because he doesn't like to do it alone [. . .], he's afraid the police will come talk to him. (Anne, age 20)

Infidelity is also a major source of discord reported by young adults (29). They describe several contexts where it occurs: the desire to get back at their partner, their absence (because they are travelling or in prison) and a physical attraction stronger than the love connection. While being unfaithful is not a distinctive characteristic of the street environment, the young people interviewed nevertheless believe it occurs more frequently there. Those who report having been cheated on said they felt sadness, anger and a sense of betrayal. Young women are more likely to address the frequency and consequences of infidelity:

[A friend] told me that [my boyfriend] is married. I got dizzy, I fell out of my seat. I loved him, I was supposed to marry him! The way I saw it, I was going to spend my life with him. When you say that the world crumbles around you, I went through it. I got away from him, it hurt. (Lili, age 24)

Just over a third of participants, mainly women (12 women versus 4 men), indicate that various forms of violence, both physical and psychological, adversely affect love experiences. The following quote illustrates how some participants are resigned to accept this violence, suggesting the need to take the good with the bad, a compromise that hints at the awareness of the tensions between idealised love and the difficult conditions of life in the street:

[My boyfriend] was playing a lot with my feelings, with my past. To him, I was a slut . . . It was verbal manipulation, but at the same time, it was violent [. . .] At one point, he was physically violent with me, he just jumped on me, I had to fight him off. But in the end, I went back to him anyway. I let him beat me. (Jessica, age 20)

One third of participants (14) stated that emotional dependency is an obstacle to establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. Among young people, this dependency translated into difficulty in enforcing their limits and in expressing their needs for fear of being rejected:

For sure in my love life, at times, it was intense, I experienced emotional dependency. Even if I was not being respected, I stayed in the relationship, even though I knew it. I tried to spread myself thin, I forgot myself . . . I didn't respect myself. That to me is a relationship of emotional dependency. (Rémi, age 29)

Slightly fewer than a third of participants (13) reported that communication difficulties, especially the inability to reveal oneself, are detrimental to love relationships:

[When I had conflicts], I didn't settle them. I ran away. And when I came back, it was as if nothing had happened. I preferred to just ignore it. This is not a good method, because I know that inside, it wasn't good for me . . . If I had said something, all this would probably have been settled more quickly and I probably wouldn't have had all these problems. (Marie-Jo, age 20)

Finally, one quarter of participants (11) report that the rush to engage in romantic relationships increases the risk of failure. They say they were too quick to invest in some relationships, without taking the time to get to know their partner or to review the situation. In some cases, this rush resulted in an unplanned pregnancy:

They happen too fast [my relationships], I'm not proud of it. Today, I will try not to make the same mistake, not to start one [a relationship] on a whim. But sometimes, I have a few little problems with it, it's like "let's go, let's have a baby the next day!" It should take more time. (Lili, age 25)

Hoping for love when the present seems dark (35)

Most participants spoke about their visions of a future involving stable love and family. Stable love and family life are high on the list, at least in the medium and long term. In the short term, however, many report feeling trapped in a cycle of failure they can break only provided they overcome great difficulties.

In the short term, the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of failure in love (27)

More than half of the participants (27), mostly young women, stated that the suffering resulting from a breakup as well as the strategies for managing it, including drug use, tend to perpetuate a cycle of failure in love. Some young women are disappointed with or uncertain about their love relationships on the whole. Such pessimistic depictions are especially common among young people starting their life on the street:

[When my girlfriend left me], I bought a 12-pack and I started to drink. It was up to me to forget everything that could hurt me. That's the way it happened. (Alex, age 22)

The importance, in the longer term, of stable love and family life (26)

A majority of participants (26) describe a future life over the medium and long term, as dominated by a stable love and family life, not in a street context:

My dreams, first, I'd have to get off the street. Because for sure I want a roof over my head and to have a child. Having another [boyfriend] like I had before, faithful, and always there for me, who would be a good father. (Stéphanie, age 18)

Love requires making changes in order to love better (13)

About a third of participants (13) believe they must change before being able to engage in a love relationship. The changes they envisage involve a resolution of some personal problems, especially those related to substance abuse and mental health. They also see the need to complete their studies and to find stable employment. It is noteworthy that those who said they had to change in order to develop a love relationship were primarily young people who reported being single. In this regard, nearly half of the young people who feel they must change are also the ones who find that it is unattractive to be a person who is on the street or a drug user:

I'm not looking for love. I've closed that door for now. I'm taking care of me. It's me I want to learn to love again [...] I am getting ready to welcome love properly ... (Jack, age 25)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to draw a portrait of romantic relationships of young adults living on the street in Montreal as they perceive it, to explore the frames through which the street-involved people describe it and to examine how the social processes shaping love in modern societies play a role in the development and maintenance in these relationships.

As in other studies on this topic, the majority of young adults interviewed were single (Ennett *et al.* 1999, Fournier 2001, Lussier *et al.* 2002, Loates and Walsh 2010). Some are single because they feel unable to be otherwise. They say they are unable to maintain a relationship as a consequence of past family relations or love attachments marked by neglect, abandonment, betrayal, drug use and infidelity. Many of them report abusive, violent parents, like the youth found in other studies (Lussier *et al.* 2002, Laporte *et al.* 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007, Pourette and Oppenheim 2007, Smith 2008, Jamouille 2009). Their previous romantic relationships are often depicted in terms of love that can only hurt (violence, betrayal), that can only end abruptly (grief, breakup), or that is undeserved (destruction of self-confidence). These family relations and love relationships seem to have helped generate a mistrust of others, and are an obstacle to commitment and to self-disclosure, two important dimensions of the ideal type of modern love (Giddens 1992, Luhmann 1998). In this context, 'no strings attached' sexual relationships could enable them to meet psycho-emotional needs (safety and affection) and material needs (shelter), without, however,

compromising their need for independence or forcing them to reveal aspects of their lives that they want to keep secret.

Other street-involved young adults said they are single by choice, mainly because of the shame they report feeling about living on the street. The symbolic burden of the homelessness has a negative impact on their self-image and is a barrier to investing in love. The young men in particular expressed concern about the image they project to prospective partners. In other words, they are concerned about their erotic capital. Some young men use the presentation strategies of lying and spending money to attract women and thus to mask a street-life context considered to be unattractive. As was the case in the research of Lussier *et al.* (2002) and Levac and Labelle (2007), young adults who say they are uncomfortable with their living conditions also report staying away from romantic relationships and making a priority of investing in improving the quality of their personal and material life. A commitment to love is planned for the future, when they will no longer be on the street, when they will be free of the stigma of being a street-involved young person, or when they will have overcome their personal difficulties. Similarly to the conclusions of Farrugia (2011), these street-involved people seem to evaluate themselves and to interpret the judgement of others toward themselves through the lens of their capital. Their testimonies illustrate how the lack of capital negatively impacts their view of themselves as love partners. These young people seem to have themselves adopted a pessimistic and despondent discourse on the romantic relationships of the people who experience homelessness, reinforcing Watson's (2011) conclusion that marginalised groups are not exempt from the societal discourses on individualisation that link success with individual achievement and problems as the outcome of individual failure.

The street-involved young adults we interviewed used terms typical of a romantic vision of love (magical, intangible and meant to last) to describe the structure of expectations guiding romantic relationships. This depiction is more frequently provided by young people who are new to living on the street and who through their emotional relationships are looking for temporal stability, kindness and safety. This depiction rapidly gives way to disillusionment and pessimism about the possibility of developing a love relationship, at least in the short term. More of the young adults living as a couple spoke of the importance of reciprocity and acceptance, possibly because they experienced and appreciated these elements or, conversely, because they were lacking them and felt dissatisfied. If they spoke about darker aspects such as violence, betrayal, or exploitation, they also mentioned the positive aspects, stressing that the experience of being a couple, even in a street-life situation, enabled them to acquire a more nuanced view of love relationships. By the same token, that those young women were more likely to emphasise the importance of communication and acceptance of the other person can be associated with the fact that more young women also described the violence they were subjected to in their love relationships and the fact that they see alternative problem-solving strategies as a result of these relationships.

The vast majority of street-involved young adults reported that they felt unable to live by the standards of lasting, romantic love they have internalised. Their love relationships are described as generally brief, and many report that love was not always the leading motivation. There are many obstacles to developing and maintaining love relationships that are consistent with the standards they inter-

nalised. Some of these obstacles are specific to the conditions of street life, while others seem inherent to the standards themselves, but exacerbated by street life. The young people interviewed demonstrate what Kellerhals and Troutot (1982) describe as the hiatus between the couple as a cultural project and social rhythms. As a 'pure' relationship (Giddens 1992), romantic love is a cultural project that leaves little room for motives other than love itself in establishing a couple relationship. But the precarious conditions of street life tend to lead to exploitative relationships, which ultimately leave some doubt about the real motivation of partners. The search for emotional or material support and the need for protection and physical contact are all motivations reported by young people interviewed by other researchers (Ensign 2000, Kidd 2003, Wesely and Wright 2005, Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007, Smith 2008, Jamouille 2009, Loates and Walsh 2010, Rayburn and Corzine 2010, Watson 2011).

Bauman's (2003) view on love seems quite telling in its application to the street context, as research on street-involved people uses similar terms to describe their social and love relations from a primarily opportunistic and self-interested angle (Côté 1989, Pourette and Oppenchain 2007, Jamouille 2009). The urge to survive in the street raises suspicions and questions the real motivations to say 'I love you', causing many young people to feel that they are more used than loved. Thus, trust in others seems even more difficult to establish on the street. Adaptive reactions in a context of mistrust that prevails on the street act as a counterbalance to the ideal type of modern love. Repeated breakups lead to the feeling that a love relationship without exploitation is impossible. The lives of these street-involved young adults appeared to be framed by a constant, exacerbated tension between trust and mistrust that takes many forms, such as the longing to be with others and the fear of being exploited, the hope to be in a loving stable relationship and a sense of hopelessness or the coping strategies of being alone to escape exploitation and being with other people to fulfil their emotional needs.

Despite this pessimism about the possibility of developing satisfying, short-term emotional relationships, the young people interviewed expressed a desire to acquire romantic and familial stability at some time in the future. This observation is consistent with other studies that have shown that romantic relationships represent a way out for street-involved young people (Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007). Romantic relationships can therefore be a positive anchor. Participants pointed out that the confidence and the motivation gained from romantic relationships helped them to care for themselves, to get off the street or out of the sex trade, and to stop using drugs, an observation also made in other studies (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999a, Kidd 2003, Kidd and Davidson 2007, Levac and Labelle 2007, Rayburn and Corzine 2010). The positive aspects of romantic relationships were associated with the support they provide on various levels such as providing a sense of self-worth and self-confidence, escaping isolation and helping to manage aggressiveness. For some, these relationships are an opportunity to build a personal identity that goes beyond the stigma of street life. Another positive aspect that extends beyond the breakup of a relationship is the integration of ex-partners into a network of social and material support that offers friendship, affection and shelter as needed.

Contrary to the conclusions of Laporte *et al.* (2007), Pourette and Oppenchain (2007) and Oppenchain *et al.* (2010) who argue that homeless people who invest in a romantic relationship are mainly those who refuse to be labelled as homeless, the

young adults interviewed in this study who engaged in such relationships were mainly those who reported the greatest sense of belonging on the street. Romantic relationships can also be seen as social integration strategies to help them find their place among other young people living on the street, to help them feel recognised, appreciated and understood by others sharing a reality similar to theirs. For some of the young adults interviewed, the quest for love was a way of reclaiming their lives from the fringes of society, while sharing the traditional ideal of romantic love. In this context, love relationships represent more than just a survival strategy: they also constitute an identity-building mechanism for the street-involved young adults. For some, love can thus be seen as a tool for defining themselves in a positive way rather than as a risk factor contributing to the negative image of delinquency attached to them.

Conclusion

The testimonials we analysed support some of the conclusions of the epidemiological research presenting romantic relationships as a risk factor for street-involved young adults (Nyamathi *et al.* 1999b, Moon *et al.* 2001, Kidd and Kral 2002, Salomon *et al.* 2002, Slesnick *et al.* 2010). In many cases, the positive potential of love remains a hope and it appears as a constraining factor, as relationships in the street often lead to drug use instead of stopping it or prevent youths from getting out of the street, for example. However, the testimonials also reveal how these relationships can act as a protective factor in helping to build young people's identity, by giving them confidence in themselves, by stimulating them to change their living conditions and, eventually, by helping them to escape street life.

As pointed out by Rayburn and Corzine (2010), the needs of people who experience homelessness are usually described in terms of health care, medication, employment, shelter, clothing and detoxification. These needs are of great importance, but to them can also be added the relevance to street-involved young adults of emotional stability, the characteristics of which are not different from those of romantic love. This article has shown the many obstacles that limit the development of romantic love. However, emotional and couple relationships can have an impact well before any resolution of the difficulties that brought the young people to the street, and they can ultimately facilitate exit from the street. In this respect, the single-sex structure of shelters, as suggested by Pourette and Oppenheim (2007) and Rayburn and Corzine (2010), must be reviewed so as to enable street-involved young adult couples to be recognised and to present themselves as such. Without adjustment for couples, shelters are involuntarily maintaining a sociability structure of emotional isolation. In this context it is relevant that further research be done on this often neglected question so as to bring to light the benefits of love relationships among street-involved young adults.

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