

## INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CONDUCT NORMS FOR DRUGS, SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY

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We, the authors of this article work at the National Development and Research Institutes, which had its offices in the South Tower of the World Trade Center. On September 11, 2001, NDRI managers had all workers evacuated before 9:00 a.m. (when the second airplane struck our tower). Our organization escaped without loss of life or physical injury. The authors grieve for the many unjust and tragic deaths at the WTC and are proud of New Yorkers whose efforts limited the scope of this tragedy. The WTC collapse buried our professional libraries and all of the research data from this 8-year research project (as well as other NDRI projects); only limited data was stored as electronic files outside the office. The current article constitutes but a fragment of the rich ethnographic data that is now largely lost. Staff at NDRI are getting our lives back together after this traumatic event and reaffirm our commitment to help others, such as the drug users and others depicted in this study. We hope that the compassion this event has generated will help in healing many difficult lives, like the multiple generations of women from Read's family described in this paper and the many similar families to which this one short narrative seeks to give voice. Our research activities resume in November 2001. NDRI is now located at 71 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, 8th floor, New York, N.Y. 10010. (U.S.A.)

*This paper examines growing up in severely-distressed households typical of many in inner-city New York where drug abuse, sexual exploitation, and violence are the norm. The continual assault on young girls often leads to mortification of self, characterized by acceptance of their situation and socialization to these behaviors in adulthood. A case study of four generations of women show that they often recapitulate the prevailing conduct norms and replicate them in the next generation. Programs are clearly needed to help ameliorate conditions in many such inner-city households, establish healthier behavioral norms, and help young girls grow into more constructive adult lifestyles.*

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### *Introduction*

The multiple problems of the America's inner cities are interrelated in complex ways. Many inner-city households are simultaneously and severely distressed by unemployment, lack of education, family dissolution, overcrowded housing, drug abuse, and crime, among other concerns (Bourgois 1995; Currie 1993; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Wilson 1987, 1996;). Isolated by these harsh conditions, subcultures of heavy drug abuse, sexual exploitation and interpersonal violence persist. This paper examines some of the social mechanisms for intergenerational transmission of subcultural norms drawing heavily on social learning theory, strain theory, and theories regarding identity formation. We contend that girls growing up within severely distressed inner-city households are continually confronted in many ways: physically, sexually and visually by the use of drugs within their household. Within their environment, a child's sense of safety, sense of self, sense of worth, and sense of any alternative future within conventional society is continually assaulted. They become inured to what comes next—a process of desensitization that Goffman (1961) described as mortification of the self. Once prepared in this manner, girls learn the prevailing conduct norms in their households regarding drugs, sexual exploitation and interpersonal violence by modeling what others did to them. As adults, they effectively replicate these behavioral conduct norms, re-initiating the mortification process upon the next generation.

Not all American inner-city households are affected by these conditions or engage in these conduct norms. However, extensive ethnographic observation suggests that this process characterizes many of the severely-distressed households having drug use/sales in inner-city New York, and probably in other American cities as well. One would think that the mainstream culture would try to implement more helpful policies. We contend that limited efforts have been mostly blind to the complex forces preserving this alternative subculture. Fundamentally, this subculture and its intergenerational transmission persists because strained economic and social conditions have combined with drug abuse/sales practices to effectively partition many subcultural participants/victims away from the mainstream cultures of legal work, adequate income, and the rewards associated with conventional living.

The remainder of this introduction further examines the context of severely distressed inner-city households and theories regarding its potential impact on identity formation. This high-level theoretical perspective is far from realistic. In actuality, the processes involved, and the lived experiences of these women are not so neat. All three processes—strain, identity formation, and social learning operate—simultaneously, over time, and build upon each other with compounded effect. Moreover, other social processes, historical events and occurrences, as well as individuals' agency certainly influence the lived experience. The body of this paper presents a case study examining the complex and deep roots leading to the transmission of conduct norms across four generations of one family yielding a family tradition of illegal drug abuse, illegal drug sales, physical and sexual violence, and property crime.

#### *Severely Distressed Households in Inner-City New York*

Goffman (1961) classifies places like mental hospitals, prisons, army barracks monasteries and old age homes as *total institutions*, places in which inmates are cut off from the outside world, have restricted autonomy, and are subjected to rules by a larger authority.

We contend that these conditions also describe the experiences of many persons in the inner-city, especially children in severely distressed households but also their grown siblings and parents. These individuals' economic and social opportunities are highly constrained. They are subjected to the limitations of low income neighborhoods and the demands of others. They often do not know if and how they could possibly appeal for help from the larger culture outside the world of their family and neighborhood, and may reject such help when offered by agency representatives. Indeed, much of their contact with the outside world—attempting to find jobs, going to social services, seeking medical services, and interacting with police, courts, jails and prisons—is experienced as impersonal, degrading, and confirms that they are being subjected to the authorities' controls and rules. Their limited education and social skills often hamper any opportunities for interactions outside of the inner-city, serving as a major social barrier that is analogous to the locked doors, high walls, barbed wire fences and armed guards of Goffman's total institutions. Within this environment, alternative conduct norms can flourish: drug, sexual, and violent behaviours are practiced against women with little risk of censure from representatives of the detached mainstream society.

Adolescence for African-Americans in poor urban neighborhoods is qualitatively different than in mainstream contexts (Burton et al. 1996; Crocket 1997). Youths in this strained environment often use substitute markers of success (such as being well dressed, obtaining money whether legal or illegal, fathering/giving birth to a child, and even physical survival) for mainstream goals (like going to college, having a career, a steady middle income job, and owning a home), which may seem wholly unattainable to them.

Within these severely distressed conditions, different conduct norms persist defining a subculture (Johnson 1973, 1980; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). These conduct norms are often at odds with those generally accepted in mainstream culture (Anderson 1999; Furstenberg et al. 1999). Moreover, behaving according to these conduct norms can have a profound impact on members of the community, especially children. In many inner-city households, drugs, sex and violence figure prominently. Maintaining a stable household and raising children is often a secondary concern, at best. At worst, children are neglected or abused.

Much prior research has identified that drug abuse, crime and violence can be transmitted across generations (Burgess and Youngblade 1988; Butterfield 1995; Dunlap, Johnson, and Rath 1996; Finkelhor et al. 1983; Hotaling et al. 1988; Johnson, Dunlap, Maher 1998; Kaufman and Zigler 1987; Widom 1990). This transmission is often attributed to entrenched economic, historical, and cultural forces. In addition to these macro forces, conduct norms, modelling by adults, and poor parenting practices certainly add to the challenge of growing up in the inner city (Johnson, Dunlap and Maher 1998). This paper examines another dimension of this process, the mortification of self in young girls that is both a by-product of the prevailing conduct norms in their households, and perhaps which helps facilitate the transmission of these norms and behaviours across generations.

Various social and psychological processes shape an individual's growing sense of identity. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the interaction between drives and impulses and the requirements of society towards conformity and moral conduct. Other theoretical traditions stress how the development of the self is a social product created and modified throughout life by interaction with other people. Social learning theory contends that a person's identity is formed from feedback provided by the environment (Akers 1977,

1998; Bandura 1977). This perspective follows from the seminal work of Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929) on the 'looking glass self'. Just as one cannot see their own countenance except through a mirror, Cooley held that one cannot see their social identity, except through society's reaction. In this way, an individual's identity or self is socially constructed. In the process, the reflection of a person's identity can be subjected to distortions (just as a fun house mirror distorts one's physical image) and, as a result, cause one to hold a distorted or even perverse sense of self.

For most, the home as defined by parents is the earliest and perhaps most influential part of this environment (Oetting and Donnermeyer 1998; Kimmel and Weiner 1985). Interpersonal violence and abusive language can be particularly traumatic for a young child; giving her a sense that her environment is impermanent; and adding to her negative self image. Taylor et al. (1997) suggest that intra-familial violence may undermine a child's basic trust in humanity and create a lifelong inability to develop close, trusting relationships. But emotional damage does not require a major trauma. Persistent poor parenting practices can also inflict profound damage. Loevinger (1966) contends that parents often serve as pacers or factors of equilibrium in their child's ego growth. Constant judging and devaluing by parents can negatively impact ego development (Hauser et al. 1984). Neglect may be as dysfunctional or perhaps even worse than abuse because it fails to provide a meaningful structure for the successful development of self (Novy et al. 1992).

Total institutions break down persons to render them compliant to their program or simply just to be more easily warehoused (Goffman 1961). Their techniques include deference, name calling, humiliation, nakedness, mutilation of body, dispossession of personal effects, sharing of personal space, dirty beds and the instillation of a fear for personal safety. Many youths in severely-distressed inner-city household suffer these same conditions as they alternately endure violent trauma, authoritarian control and neglect. They learn to disregard their 'self', as their personal value may be routinely assaulted and degraded. Eventually, they internalize this view leading to a compromised ego or mortification of the self.

Garbarino et al (1991, 1992) suggest that the hostility endured by poor urban youths is often similar to the conditions prevailing in war-torn countries that lead to *posttraumatic stress disorder*, characterized by diminished future orientation, guilt, fear, lowered self-esteem, and impaired intimate relationships. This enduring disorder can result in a variety of mental and physical stresses as well as various negative social development outcomes (Taylor et al. 1997; Bell and Jenkins 1991). The literature on spouse assault suggests another context common to severely distressed inner-city life in which a similar mortification of the self can prevail (Giles-Sims 1983; Walker 1984; Hotaling et al 1988). Hotaling et al. (1988, p. 143) identifies *Battered Woman Syndrome* as having

features of both anxiety and affective disorders, cognitive distortions including disassociation and memory loss, re-experiencing traumatic events from exposure to associated stimuli, disruption of interpersonal relationships, and psychophysiological disturbances. A hypersensitivity to potential violence occurs that creates an expectation of harm and a readiness to protect and defend oneself. If actual defense is seen as impossible, then the best coping skills are developed to keep the potential harm at a minimum level. For some, it is seen as an impossible task and a passive, helpless reaction is adopted.

*Methodology*

Since 1994, a team of sociologists has been studying the intergenerational transmission of behavior patterns and conduct norms of drug-abusing households in inner-city New York. The project has focused primarily upon *African-American* family/kin systems. Potential subjects (households) were identified through key informant contacts (Dunlap and Johnson 1999). Parents gave their informed consent to talk to children (who also gave their consent). Forty households representing a range of experiences typical of the inner city were selected for the intensive study designed to reveal the processes in intimate detail. Several similarly situated households in which members were generally disconnected from drug activities were included for comparison. The goal was to give voice to genuine experiences in these households with an eventual aim of identifying public policy interventions that could promote healthy lifestyles while meeting individual needs of families.

The project followed an *omnibus longitudinal ethnography* to develop insight into the lives and relationships of the focal subjects and households. Staff underwent intensive initial training (Williams et al. 1992) and meetings were held regularly to provide continual training and promote sharing of information. In the early stages of the project, staff learned how to gain access and build rapport with household members through their own experiences and through collegial discussions at staff meetings. Over the course of the project, household members were interviewed regularly and routinely observed as they went about the various activities that filled their daily lives. In repeatedly returning to the same households, project staff developed and maintained strong rapport with subjects. This rapport proved useful on those occasions when staff had to encourage subjects to talk about painful topics and/or to remain in the study; of course, the final decision was always the subjects'. Over the course of this project, individuals experienced important developmental transitions such as progressing from adolescent to young adult, from mother to grandmother, as well as increases in or desistance from drug use and/or sales. Tracking subjects over time was challenging because household composition routinely changed as subjects left a household by choice or otherwise (such as when removed by Child Protective Services). In these cases, substantial effort was made to maintain contact and to study them in their new settings and relationships.

Because the events, behaviors, relationships, and perceptions of individuals occurring in a household are complexly interrelated, the project took an omnibus focus, simultaneously examining a wide-variety of social behaviors as well as the belief systems and conduct norms followed in many behavior domains. This comprehensive approach was designed to document what at first might appear as numerous and apparently unrelated episodes and interactions among household members. Over time, tentative theories about the underlying sociocultural processes emerged from the data leading to further directed observation that helped refine the theories, and so forth. The result was a succession of more specific theories supported by an increasing base of observations. This painstaking approach helped ensure the validity of data collected and its analysis.

The collection of observations and their analysis was guided by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967); grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967); naturalistic behaviouralism (Denzin 1978); and phenomenology (Carini 1975; Bussis, Chittendon, and Amarel

1973). (This process is also well described by Charmaz, 2000, as constructivist grounded theory.) These perspectives provided a framework as well as methodology to allow subjects to be understood through their own eyes, their own words, and own living patterns. In addition to objectively measuring and recording events (from the *etic* perspective), staff sought to understand the symbolic meaning and importance of events that subjects attached to them (an *emic* or native perspective, Lofland 1971). The study of households facilitated use of the phenomenological view, which allows for the parallel existence of multiple subjective realities expressed by each individual.

The ethnography was also guided by the insights from social learning theory (Bandura 1977) and symbolic interactionism (Denzin 1978; Blumer 1969) which both emphasize the need to identify the meanings of human behavior and the socio-cultural context in which interactions and the specific arrangements occur. From this perspective, understanding any social phenomenon requires learning about the normative structure, dynamic definitions, and the interaction patterns of social actors. Social learning theory holds that individuals, the immediate environment (e.g. households), and the neighbourhood (street subculture) are continuously involved in reciprocal interactions. Individuals primarily learn by observation and talking so that people acquire ongoing integrated patterns of behaviour (learning and internalizing conduct norms) without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error. Conversely, conduct norms are effectively defined by how people tend to interact.

Over time, the project developed an intimate portrait of each households' family tree; explored behaviors across generations; documented various conduct norms and their variations; and, identified violent behavior patterns while observing their trajectories and consequences. Through continued observation and discussion with subjects, a view of the systemic whole emerged showing how patterns of drug use, violence, and sexual exploitation arise within an overall context of familial social interaction.

This paper examines the transmission of conduct norms and the mortification process operating among females in one family across four generations. This restricted focus allows for a detailed portrait of the complex interactions between prevailing conduct norms and the emergence of self. Based on the project's extended experience within 68 inner-city households and involving 178 individuals, Read's family (all names are pseudonym's) was selected as quite typical, within this rarefied environment, as the basis for the case study reported below.

### *Findings*

This section first describes the four generations of women included in the case study. Figure 1 presents the family tree and a thumbnail summary of each subject. Then, the paper examines the conduct norms for drug abuse, sexual exploitation and violence, how each generation of young females were subjected to these unconventional behaviours, how this assaulted their development of self, and how they subsequently inflicted these same behaviours on the next generation. The section concludes by examining the domestic instability that resulted from and simultaneously contributed to the development and persistence of these conduct norms.

***Dolita (Read's mother)*** was born in 1908 and grew up on a financially impoverished farm in North Carolina. Sexual promiscuity, sexual exploitation, and incest were not

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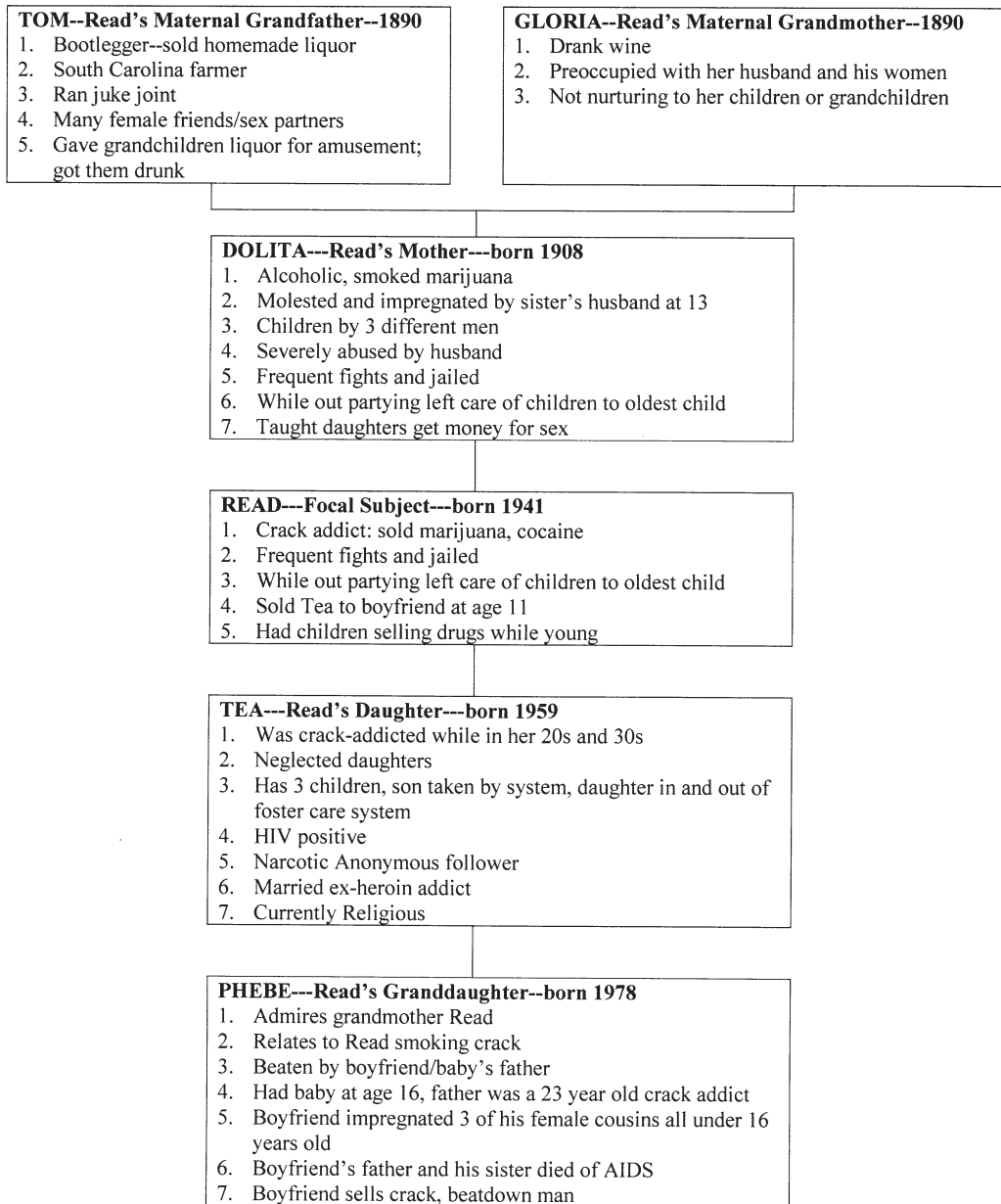


FIG. 1 Read's family tree

uncommon in her family. Dolita's oldest daughter, Flora, had been fathered by her sister's husband. She ended up having seven children by three different men. Dolita eventually married Jim, who fathered her last four children. Jim routinely abused Dolita while they lived together in North Carolina. He moved to New York City after one incident in which he cut Dolita so badly that she had to go to the hospital. Despite the abuse, upon release from the hospital she followed him to New York. At the time, she left her first set of children (Read among them) with her mother, Gloria, to raise. A few years later, Gloria died. Dolita sent for Read to come to New York to help her take care of the children fathered by Jim.

Clearly Read's family heritage of drinking, violence, and sexual exploitation predated her experiences in inner-city New York and her generation of the family. In a historically and geographically parallel study, Butterfield (1995) traced the Bosket family's violent history through multiple generations, from slavery in rural South Carolina to the struggles to get by in Harlem. Willie Bosket became New York State's most dangerous prisoner serving out his days in a specially secured and isolated cell. Butterfield suggests that the roots of violent interaction were much larger than the Bosket family itself. He suggests that violence was inherent in the Southern code of honor. Regular exposure to violence resulted in mortification of self that was inherent in the American institution of slavery, whereby African Americans were denied their sense of humanity and treated as property for hundreds of years. After emancipation as a result of the American Civil War of 1861–1865, most African Americans continued to work on plantations in the rural South.

Starting around 1890, millions of African Americans left the rural poverty and discrimination of the South for the Industrial North with the hope of better lives, a movement termed 'The Great Migration'. These hopeful pilgrims were met with housing discrimination, high rents, and low-wage jobs (see Brown, 1965; Butterfield, 1995; Gutman, 1976). Butterfield (1995) contends that African Americans brought their conduct norms for honor and violence to inner-city New York where these norms morphed into a pre-occupation with not being *dissed* (disrespected). Any efforts to possibly overcome such a violent heritage were often confounded by the harsh economic conditions prevailing, and by overt racism. Whatever the cause, violent behaviour appears to have been inherent within Read's family, too.

**Read** was fifty-three years old when recruited for this study in 1994. At the time, she was in good physical shape. She dressed neatly and always attempted to present herself in a manner in which she could demand respect, which she often received. When her children were younger, she considered herself a *flygirl*; she was hip and partied often. When she reminisces about her past life, she often tells about having 'big money', mostly obtained from drug selling and welfare scams. Selling drugs was a full-time opportunity and career for Read. When she was not at home, she had her children handle the sales for her, making her a fairly reliable and well-compensated connection.

In 1994, she and her son, Celo, had just moved into an apartment after completing a bout of homelessness. Maintaining a household in the inner city was quite difficult and beyond the ability of many involved with street life. Because she was able to maintain herself and her household, the drug dealers and other participants in the street subculture tended to look up to Read. She had numerous friends, held frequent parties in her apartment, and sold marijuana and cocaine.

Read received a social security stipend for Celo, whose father had been killed in an accident. Read had helped herself and others obtain income transfers through her



knowledge of 'the system', by writing letters for those applying for money under various programs. She studied the rules and regulations of mainstream society and used them to her advantage. For years, Read maintained contact with local political leaders in order to get whatever privileges she could wrestle out of them. She was 'slick' and 'manipulative'. For helping them, her acquaintances frequently paid her small fees or gave her drugs.

Read always felt that she was somehow superior to her fellow crack smokers. In addition to her household and her looks, she had more education than they did. At one point, Read learned that she could go to college on student loans. Since it was a way by which she could get money, she went (hence her pseudonym 'Read') but did not finish. Street life and education did not go together. It was difficult to get high, stay out nights, and go to school the next day.

Read's children had become less impressed with her than were her crack-smoking acquaintances. Her children visited her less and less over the years. Celo was the only one who would spend any substantial amount of time with her. The others claimed she was abusive, untrustworthy and a bad influence on the grandchildren due to her drug addiction. She claimed her children were simply jealous of her and did not want to see her leading her own life.

By 1997, she appeared less slick, both physically and psychologically. In order to support her lifestyle, she had taken to performing sexual services for money with an established group of males. She was very proud of this arrangement. On the street, young females were prized. Old crack addicts were not. She claimed her sexual skills kept her customers returning to her and that she had this over many of the 'chippies' (younger women on the streets).

**Tea (Read's daughter)** was 38 years old in 1997, had been a crack addict in her 20s and 30s, and had been recently diagnosed as HIV positive. She had recently completed treatment, turned her life around, and chose to live by the 12-step philosophy common to many drug abuse treatment programs. Accordingly, she accepted that there was a higher power, that she was an addict in recovery, and she lived 'one day at a time' in the shadow of her past lifestyle. As of 1997, she had made progress toward establishing a mainstream lifestyle. She had married (a man she met in the recovery programme), worked full time, dressed neatly, kept her home in a housing project clean, ate well, helped other recovering addicts and attended church regularly. Tea had three children. Although she regularly fought with her mother (Read), she felt it was important for her children to know Read in order for them to have a generational tie. However, she did not trust her and monitored her children closely when they were with Read. Beyond that, she tended to distance herself from her mother, her influence and her partying lifestyle.

**Phebe (Read's granddaughter)** is Tea's oldest daughter. She was 17 years old in 1997, tall, slightly overweight, intelligent, soft voiced, and somewhat shy. Despite her mom's (Tea) current conventionality, as of 1997 Phebe and her friends were heavily involved in the street/drug subculture. She and her infant son lived with Tea. Rudolph, the father, was a crack addict with limited prospects. He sometimes dealt drugs to support himself, had a criminal record, and was well-known in the public housing project for his violent behavior. He called himself a 'beatdown man'. Drug dealers would direct him to inflict punishments on workers and addicts in order to teach them a lesson. On several occasions, he hit Phebe but afterwards said that he loves her and wants his child; marriage was something neither he nor Phebe was considering.

*Conduct Norms Regarding Drugs*

The project initially set out to learn about the abuse of crack prevailing in many inner-city New York households in the late 1980s and 1990s. Interviews with Read indicated that her upbringing had been heavily influenced by substance use, but not crack, which had not yet become popular. Much research suggests that which drugs are popular is culturally determined and varies substantially over time and across locations (Johnson and Muffler 1997). However, it would appear that some behavioral norms regarding substance use might actually transcend these trends.

Read's *household of orientation*, the home in which she grew up in the rural south, was dominated by alcohol use, abuse and sales. Her grandfather, Tom, made and sold bootleg alcohol. During the holidays, he would give the children alcohol and watched them get drunk in amusement. In this way, he taught Dolita (Read's mother) and then Read to drink alcohol to excess. Read recalled the following images of alcohol use and sales as a child in her grandfather's house:

Yeah, and they would drink, and the women used to hang all over them because when they play music, the people give them free liquor and stuff. Then the men get mad, and they want to fight. And then my grandfather used to be a bootlegger. So, it was always a lot of violence around. Even when I was growing up, I used to see a lot of violence concerning the sale and use of alcohol.

It could be possible, but that was the same thing they do like drugs. A guy that was, that had a liquor still compare with the people these days that sell drugs. They had a lot of women . . . The women and every, mens and everybody they bring the men to buy liquor. That's part of your business and part of the trade.

As an adult, Read snorted cocaine and smoked marijuana. She tried heroin but said that it was not to her taste. In the later 1980s, crack became the drug of choice in inner city New York (Golub and Johnson 1999). Read became a crack user in 1985 and used the drug compulsively virtually ever after. This dependence led to various conduct norms regarding crack use and drug sales in her *household of procreation*, her home as an adult with her children. These norms contributed to both the abuse and neglect of her children, and compromised their personality development. Most of her children subsequently became crack users.

In Read's household, children did not learn about delay of gratification. Read's continual drug use and sales dominated their lives. She lived for the acquisition and consumption of her drug, cocaine. She always had many "friends" who were constant visitors to her apartment, mainly to purchase cocaine and sometimes marijuana. When she got older and her children were grown and out of her household, her ability to sell decreased. When her last son Celo lived with her as a young adult, Read constantly searched his room and stole from him. He tried selling marijuana, but she would find and steal his money. He also tried selling incense and oils, but Read always found the money and spend it on her cocaine habit. When Celo moved out to live with a girlfriend, Read began to prostitute (in her late 50s).

In many households with a crack-abusing parent, they would even sell their children's possessions such as a bicycle or a radio. This would impact heavily on the child as if they were living in an asylum (Goffman 1961). This project observed how the dominance by the parental authority figure created a sense of not owning anything. It also led to many hardships due to shortages as such basic goods as food, clothing, and a place to live, as

well as desired attention. A parallel process effectively breaks inmates and mortifies their sense of self (Goffman 1961), rendering them compliant to the institution's rules. Indeed, living with a crack-abusing parent seemed very similar to living in a totalitarian asylum, although not a particularly therapeutic nor well-run institution.

Based on observations from this project, the effective function of the crack-abusing household appeared to be to maintain the parent's addiction and secondarily to indoctrinate children into the lifestyle. Read introduced Tea to marijuana and smoked it with her. She not only taught Tea to consume drugs, she taught her to sell and required her to stay home in order to serve as a reliable connection. Tea recalled that while growing up:

They [Read] used to keep me in the house, make me clean up, baby-sit, [and] cook. I had to do everything. And um, and I was selling reefer for her [Read] when she would leave me in the house.

Tea had not been individually singled out for this role, though. Read also had her sons selling marijuana for her, often in the schoolyard to classmates.

When Tea established her own household, her children also experienced substance use and sales. Tea's children were taken from her for years due to her crack addiction. Just like Tea, Phebe recalled the impact of drugs and drug sales in her household of orientation:

There use to be a lot of crackheads in and out the house all the time and if I was to come to the kitchen or something—it was open and it had no door—if I was to come to the kitchen and tell my mother I'm hungry, she would get up and slap me.

I raised myself since I was the age of nine. I got taken away from my mother, me and my sister. We went to a foster home for two years. But for the first nine years of life, I raised myself and my sister. Most of the time there was no house.

Each generation had the experience and then recapitulated the prominent involvement in the use and sales of drugs in their household: Dolita, Read and Tea. In 1997, the latest mother in this line of ascendancy, Phebe, was using marijuana and crack, and her boyfriend was both using and selling crack, regularly.

#### *Conduct Norms Regarding Sexual Exploitation*

Sexual exploitation at an early age is often a pivotal event, resulting in a lifelong, indelible scar. It can be a scary, strange, and traumatic experience at first. On the other hand, this study found that it was commonplace, even the norm within Read's family across the generations. The women interviewed expressed outrage and resentment at having been exploited as a child. Within each girl's household of orientation, however, there was no apparent outlet for expressing their concerns or for gaining protection from future sexual exploitation. The female head of the household generally was not particularly sympathetic; she was often the one who arranged for older men to have sex with their daughters. The adult males around the household generally were also not particularly sympathetic; quite often, they were the ones having sex with these young girls. As a result, these girls never established that this sexual exploitation was unacceptable and wrong. Indeed, the parents and adults set a clear expectation that early sexual relationships were encouraged and expected of young women.

Through their actions as they aged, these girls also expressed an acceptance of sex for money, and sex for drugs. Through treatment of their children, the women exhibited internalization of this conduct norm and passed on the legacy. Read related her mother Dolita's experiences back in North Carolina.

[T]hey lived on a farm. They were very poor. All the beds were in one room. They all slept together or wherever space could be found. My mother and her sister Joyce slept in the same bed. When Joyce got married, my mother had to sleep in the bed with Joyce and her husband. That's how she [Dolita] became pregnant by my aunt's husband cause they were all sleeping together.

At the time, Dolita was 13 years old. Neither her father nor her mother nor sister (Joyce) protested, nor took steps to protect her from these sexual advances. In fact, Joyce's husband remained a part of the household for many years.

As an adolescent, Dolita (and her descendants) was taught through experiences to be passive to and submit to sexual advances. The unstated message (and the operational conduct norm) was that a girl's sexuality was not her own, but that her mother could offer it to men for money or drugs. A girl's virginity and consent for sexual encounters was like a personal possession taken from her by the authority figure in her total institution. Such early sex was experienced as degrading, humiliating, naked exploitation. These early sexual experiences constituted a direct assault on the developing sense of self—creating deep feelings of guilt, shame, fear, anger, and 'stuffing it' (psychologically trying to forget the experiences)—that constitute a mortified self in the young woman. None of these girls or their mothers ever considered the possibility of telling a non-family member about these early intercourse experiences, nor seeking rape charges, nor gaining protection.

Dolita passed these conduct norm about early sex on to her daughters. She taught them to accept sexual exploitation, but always for a price. Read vividly recalled how her mother would casually sell her sister's sexuality.

She say, Ella [Read's sister], go with that man, Ella would go with the man. She would say, go ahead and get him. He got money. Get \$20 or \$30 from him. Tell her she be talking about going with some nigger and gets his money. And Ella would do that. Yeah, she would do it.

Read's family was not planned any better than was her mother's. One day as a teenager, she was home by herself. A male friend of the family came to visit. When he found no one at home but Read, he sexually molested her, and Read became pregnant with her first child. Once encumbered with the responsibility of childcare, a young woman is faced with the challenge of trying to get by. Read learned how to hustle. She also learned from her experiences and her desperation that her own daughters were an asset she could exploit. Sadly, Read passed the philosophy of sexual exploitation (but for a price) on to her own daughter. Tea related how her mother sold her sexuality, her outrage, her repression, her mortification, and her confusion that lasted well into adulthood:

When I was 11 years old, she [Read] brought a man in my bedroom, and she told me that the man was gonna lick me in my private place, and if I don't want him to do it, just let her know. And this is because she wanted to get drugs, and you know. Well, I asked her, um, you know for a long time I, stuffed that, you know, 'cause I didn't want to talk about it, I uh, and um, as I started getting better, I was in therapy. And I started getting better, a lot of different things started surfacing up in me, and I wanted to ask her why did she do it. And uh, she said was um, 'you wasn't no Miss Goody Two Shoes. You gone done worse

things than that'. And I said, 'Well Mommy I was only 11 years old. What could I have been doing at 11 years old?'

After many years of drug abuse and street life, and having her children removed to Foster Care, Tea enlisted and completed a treatment program in an attempt to get her children returned to her. As of 1997, her son was still in foster care.

In the late 1980s, when Read and her older children became heavily involved with crack, sex for money, and sex for crack dominated her household. Initially, journalistic accounts had attributed crack users sex drive to the potency of crack cocaine. However, a more thorough study of the crack subculture revealed that the basis of the crack-sex connection was more economic than chemical (Bourgois and Dunlap 1993; Ratner 1993). A study of women crack users who supported their habits through prostitution revealed that most had already been involved with commercial sex before they became involved with crack (Fagan 1994). Crack had not made them prostitutes, but it did make them increase their frequency of prostitution in order to support their habit. More broadly, crack did not create the problems of the inner city, though it certainly intensified the devastation (Johnson, Golub and Fagan 1995).

Phebe came of age in the midst of the frenzy that was the height of the Crack Epidemic. Tea (her mother) had started using crack shortly after Phebe's birth. As Phebe grew up, Tea's consumption and sales of crack intensified. At age 12, Phebe was first exploited by one of the numerous males that became a part of their household at the time. Thus, the tradition of sexual exploitation of girls and young women continued into this next generation of this severely-distressed household.

### *Violence*

Physical and verbal violence against children and against women in relationships appeared to be a part of life in Read's family. Just like with sexual exploitation, women were expected to and most often accepted much physical abuse. Read recalled how violence abounded in her grandmother's house back in North Carolina:

They [her uncles and aunts] used to always hang out in those places and be drinking. I had five uncles, no I had four uncles and four aunts. They was always hanging out and drinking, fighting. There was a lot of violence back then in my family. My grandfather was there, but they were grown and he was a bootlegger himself so he really couldn't do anything about it, you know.

Read remembered that Dolita and Jim drank heavily together. After becoming intoxicated, fights often erupted. Jim would assault both Dolita and Read, regularly. Sometimes, both Jim and Dolita were arrested and jailed for a few days to 'cool' them down. Read recalled the fight that led Jim to leave Dolita's parents' household:

So, when my mother was living with him, he beat her up all the time. He cut her up from here to there. He cut her under her arm and cut her sister like this and cut her brother-in-law. He cut everybody that looked at him hard. He was crazy. That was Pig. When he cut my mother up real bad he ran. He left [the] south and moved to New York. He left with my mother in the hospital getting a hundred and eight stitches. They had to sew her titty back on. He skipped town and came to New York.

She got sewed back together and got well, she got the train and came to New York and left all of us, all her kids down south. Then he came back down to North Carolina and got his kids [from a previous

relationship], her kids that she had by him, and brought them back to New York. He still beat her and there was no food in the house. He was taking the money and buying liquor because he was always an alcoholic.

This incident reveals the extent to which Dolita had come to accept interpersonal violence from her husband. It must have required exceedingly low self-esteem and/or sense of no alternative for her to move herself and later her family to be with her assailant, over a thousand miles from her extended family and support network.

In coming of age, Read eventually formed her own household, in which her husband frequently assaulted her, but in which she was also violent to others. Tea (Read's daughter) recalled, '[My parents] didn't have a relationship because he used to drink all the time and beat her'. But he never hit Tea. Read would hit Tea, as would her boyfriends. But Tea's father never hit her. Consequently, Tea identified with him, in spite of her observations of him regularly abusing her mother. Unlike many women in similar households, Tea knew her father and had a caring relationship with him:

My father never cursed at me, he never hit me, he never looked down on me when I did something wrong, he was always there for me whenever I needed him. Now the times when he wasn't around, I could have used him if I needed him. But she [Read] took me all the way to California. We was living out there, we lived in New Jersey, we lived in Philadelphia, I [he] wasn't nowhere around. But every time I was in New York and I needed my father, and I needed something from him, all I had to do was pick up the phone.

My father no longer sniffs coke, he no longer drinks, he never smoked reefer, and he, he smoked cigarettes. My father understands me, my father loves me, he tells me he love me, and he give me hugs. I see him, he call me every Sunday. To tell me he love me.

Tea too eventually entered a violent marriage. Her daughter, Phebe, recalled the strife:

[My mother and father had] a lot of arguments. Like every time around pay day or whenever each one of them gets some money and they don't share their drugs, like one night I remember we was sitting on the floor and my mother was serving us some Sphaghettio in a can and my father said save some for him and it wasn't enough and he slapped her earring off her ear.

He slapped her earring out her ear and my mother ran. My mother told me to run downstairs and call the cops and my father wouldn't let me by, and my mother kept talking so he left. Well he left the doorway and he went to go beat her up some more and I called the cops. I was young. I was like seven.

One day, the field worker observed that at age 17, Phebe did not appear to have done any better in relationships than had Tea, Read, or Dolita before her:

When I arrived at Tea's house today I noticed that Phebe's face was swollen and she looked like she had been in a fight. When I got the opportunity to talk to her, I asked her what had happened. She told me that she had a fight with Rudolph [her boyfriend]. I tried to get her to talk more about it, but she refused. She related that everything was all right. It was nothing.

In Phebe's world physical violence was 'nothing', it was an unremarkable part of relationships.

*Transient Domesticity*

Up to now, this paper has used the word ‘household’ in the traditional sense, as living arrangements involving family and others. The structure of the African American household has been a point of a long and heated dialogue. A central point of the discussion is the Moynihan (1965) Report, which contended that there was a ‘culture of poverty’ among African American families that grew out of the experience of slavery in which fathers were often sold but mothers were kept with their children. Moynihan argued that children needed a father’s influence which implied that the female-headed household was pathological and the ultimate cause of intergenerational persistent poverty. More recently, Wilson (1987, 1996) contended that African-American women were staying single and not marrying African-American men because they lacked the full-time stable employment needed to fulfill their family role.

We contend that these simplistic structural explanations are limited and represent a middle-class bias. They attempt to answer the question of ‘Why can’t poor black families be more like middle-class white families?’ by focusing on a few correlations. This section looks at Read’s family childbearing and household formation to understand these activities in context.

In inner-city New York in the 1990s, households were constantly in flux as individuals lost their apartments (often for not paying their bills) and as people came and went. Consequently, we refer to the resultant living arrangements as *transient domesticity*. A person might be invited into a household as one member’s sexual partner. While there, that person might also have sex with other household members. Marriage seldom preceded sex or childbearing, nor did childbearing result in marriage. Some didn’t stay in a given household for long. This was especially true for men. However women would leave, too, even women who had children.

In Read’s family, the roots of transient domesticity spanned generations. Due to household instability in each generation, the raising of children generally fell wherever it could. Initially to the mother and often to the grandmother when available. Another pattern emerged because parents and grandparents could not always be counted upon. The oldest or most responsible child often took on the responsibility of looking out for the others—a heroic undertaking given the caregivers own tender age, lack of role models, and lack of support financially and emotionally from others. This lack of oversight and protection facilitated neglect, sexual exploitation and violent encounters.

Because her parents drank heavily and fought, Read’s grandmother ended up as her primary caregiver during her early years. Unfortunately, this was the same grandmother and household that had raised her undependable mother. Read also grew up in the south. Her grandmother was her main caregiver during her early growing up years. Read recalled that she ended up raising herself and eventually several of her siblings:

My mother [Dolita] had three children before she got married, and we were born when she was still living with her mother, and after she had me, she left and went off and started another family and moved to the next town. So, I didn’t see her [Dolita] unless something happened in the family. So the next time I saw, I don’t remember my mother other than when I got to be seven years old and my uncle died, and she came home to go to the funeral.

She lived over in the town. That was like, we lived in Waston, and what separated Waston from town was a bridge with two rivers. She lived in town, and we all lived with our grandmother in the country, yeah, and

she didn't come and see us and I didn't know who my father was. I think I was, I was about ten, nine or ten years old before I ever seen my father for the first time in my life.

Read recalled that her grandmother did not provide much warmth:

My grandmother [Gloria], she didn't spend a lot of time nurturing any of us. She was always complaining about my grandfather and worrying about him and these women. And then she carried that whole thing about my uncle that got killed and who did it to him. She carried that around with her like it was a heavy burden. So, my grandfather [Tom] was the nurturing parent. Well, I was the baby of the family, and he spent a lot of time with me. And he played the guitar. He would make up songs and sing them to me.

He would take me hunting and tell me sit on the log, and then he'll go down in the woods and then he would come back with a lot of squirrels and rabbits. He treated the other kids normally. He treated them normally. You know, he didn't spend extra time or nothing with them. He would just have them doing things and chores. He would more or less tell them about doing chores and stuff like that.

Tom, of course, was the same grandfather who gave the children liquor during the holidays to see them get drunk for amusement. Thus, Read's good fortune at having been made his favourite was certainly limited.

Moreover, Read's grandmother made sure she did chores. She recalled that her education was truncated by her grandmother's imposition of work obligations:

We had to go and pick the cotton and stuff, right. And I was eleven years old, and I was still in the first grade, and my sister was thirteen, and she was still in the, she was in the second or the third grade. Then my grandmother died and we came to New York.

One time, Read even received a serious beating because she and her sister went to school instead of going to pick cotton. Read's thirst for some knowledge led her to become one of the only members from among numerous generations of her family to go to college.

After her grandmother died and she moved to New York, Read did not receive much warmth from Dolita:

My mother never really paid me much attention. Only when she'd always use me for the maid of the house to clean up. . . but when she got paid, she never give me a dime. She never said anything nice to me about how I took care of the children and how I kept the house. She just always fuss at me and complain.

Much of Dolita's time was spent consuming alcohol and going to clubs and social gatherings.

Read continued this pattern of parental indulgence which left the children responsible for each other into the next generation. Tea recalled that Read was uninvolved with her upbringing:

My mother hung out a lot of times. Um, my mother used to hang out in bars a lot, and I used to have to do the cooking and the cleaning up for my younger brothers and sisters. And um, I don't know what was up, she used to go out and do a lot of stuff and just leave me home, tend to the kids. I remember, when Monroe was a baby, she left us in the apartment for a long time, and he was hungry, and I was trying to cook, and my other brother, he was playing with his pickup truck, and he set a fire in it and rolled it under the bed. And caught the house on fire. I was about 8 or 9 years old, about 8.

Tea wasn't a much better caregiver than her mother was. Phebe recalled:



When I was little my mother never talked to me. I was scared of her. Cause she was always hitting me. She was always slapping me.

Tea eventually lost her apartment and started living with a succession of people—basically, whoever would permit her and her children to stay—in cramped quarters such as on one occasion as Phebe recalled:

All right, it was me, my sister and my mother, this lady, her boyfriend and her two kids. We all lived in the apartment together. She was my mother's friend. She use to get high with her. She lived with her boyfriend in the house. We lived in three rooms.

In most cases, they wore out their welcome after only a short time and had to move on again.

This perhaps represented a low point in Read's family history of transient domesticity, homelessness. This was part of the tragedy of the crack era, where parental and grandparental attention to familial concerns declined to the point where there was not even a steady household for the kids. As a result, increasing numbers of children like Tea's ended up in the foster care system.

### *Discussion*

A growing body of literature is documenting how drug abuse, sexual exploitation, and violence tend to run through generations of families. This essay examined how conduct norms for these unconventional behaviors are transmitted across generations to children through abuse, neglect, and negative role models. Young girls learn (unhappily) to accept violent physical and sexual assault, substance abuse and sales, and unstable households as the effective conduct norms in their households while growing up. In essence, their sense of self and any possible hope and preparation for a mainstream lifestyle seem to die in the face of the realities of their households. This socializes them to internalize the prevailing conduct norms, accept and expect abusive relationships, and treat their children no better than they had been treated as children. This generational training process initializes and maintains the intergenerational transmission process of drug abuse/sales, sexual exploitation, and violence.

In each generation, Dolita, Read, Tea and Phebe never had much of a chance to enter the mainstream of conventional society. They were socialized to and accepted their situation and made the best of it. Their early protests against their mistreatment went perhaps unheard at the time and certainly unheeded. In many respects, the totalitarian asylum of the inner city and their severely-distressed households have been insulated from the outside world and conventional norms of behaviour. Instead, the conduct norms that prescribe acceptance of sexual exploitation, interpersonal violence, and substance abuse permeate each generation's experience. Even when Read enrolled in college (one of the few co-occurring subjects to do so), her adherence to street conduct norms (using college loans to finance her drugs, partying and illegal sales) effectively defeated her major opportunity to break out of the cycle of poverty. Read and other subjects live their lives within neighbourhoods that are only a few miles from the epicentre of global finance in New York City, yet are culturally light years away. What

could be a short subway ride for these children and adults has been an impassable chasm to most of those embedded in this subculture.

The social problems of inner city New York are many and complexly inter-related. Conditions that favor unemployment, educational failure, family dissolution, crime and drug abuse are clearly enmeshed with behavioral norms for drug abuse, sexual exploitation, violence and transient domesticity. It would appear that addressing the concerns of the inner city would involve much more than mere provision of services: be it improved education, policing or job training and availability. A transformation of severely distressed households in the inner-city will also necessitate a cultural change either by revolution or evolution. Most importantly, it involves hearing the voices of young girls and women in distressed households trying to find warmth and security, trying to grow up, and trying to establish an orientation to a self that is oriented toward conventional society, but under very hostile conditions within their families and households.

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