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Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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"Grieving Online:
Street-Involved Youths' Use of Social Media After a Death"

Social Dimensions of Health Program

December 13, 2017
2:00 P.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B017

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Lisa Mitchell, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Anne Marshall, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Bernadette Pauly, School of Nursing, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Eugene McCann, Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Maureen Ryan, School of Nursing, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Grieving Online: Street-Involved Youths' Use of Social Media After a Death conveys the context and lived experiences of 20 street-involved youth in Victoria BC, who live both on the streets and on line simultaneously (boyd, 2008a). Using a narrative methodology, including poetry, I explore how these realities affect the grief experiences after a death. Youth strategize to find access to computers and cell phones, using free wifi, sharing minutes, or buying or trading devices in the street economy in order to communicate through texting and viewing and posting to Facebook. Dire financial and unstable living situations, the complex and difficult relationships they have with both family and friends and the traumatic circumstances they have endured directly contributes to stress and anxiety and the ways they grieve the losses of people in their lives. This vulnerability, violence and instability is entangled both in their face to face interactions and in private and public communications online. It is also directly connected to the concept of precarity: "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p.ii).

There are several key findings from youths' narratives. First, although youth often see themselves as outsiders from "regular society", they have taken up a normative discourse of a "grieving subject" in their language and stories. This is a discourse of progress that includes stages and tasks and the understanding that to grieve is to do work. I argue that for many youth, this discourse is heightened because the stakes are high: their lives are surveilled by police and child protective services. Sometimes shunned by family of the deceased, or without private spaces to mourn, their expressions of grief are exposed and sometimes criminalized.

Second, I argue that throughout their narratives, youth position themselves as moral beings and actors talking about and making sense of death through hierarchies of values and decisions, and framing the death as an opportunity to explore how they want to be in the world or how the world should be. This vision of street-involved youth actively experimenting in the moral laboratory (Mattingly, 2013) of the street and the moral predicaments they faced when grieving challenges the social stereotypes of street-involved youth as delinquent, loners, dysfunctional, refusing to 'grow up' and 'be responsible.'

Third, youth spoke about negotiating and managing relationships both in person and within the affordances of social networking sites (boyd 2009) such as the visibility and persistence of online discussions. My findings demonstrate that these affordances have implications after a death. For example, youth were wrestling with the performances of grief online, trying to make sense "to what extent these declarations of grief are public posturing and to what extent they are genuine, personal expressions of deep feeling" (Dobler, 2006, p.180). Youth caution about posting too quickly about the death online, so that family or close friends would not have to find out online. They value communication that is private, face-to-face, or by phone that is intentional and acknowledges the importance of relationship with the deceased.

Their thoughtful expertise can help all of us as we try to navigate the experiences of grieving online. Although they shared a great deal of ambivalence for the place of social media in their lives, for many it is a powerful tool to tell themselves and others about who they are and how they want to be remembered.