

“Crack Ends it All”? A Study of the Interrelations Between Crack Cocaine, Social Environments, Social Relations, Crime and Homicide Among Poor, Young Men in Urban Brazil

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Abstract

In this article, actor network theory is used to explore the consumption of crack cocaine in street settings. The article is based on multiple periods of fieldwork over several years among young men in Salvador, Brazil. The contribution of the article is three-fold. First, it explores how two different socio-spatial contexts – the poor *favela* communities and the street settings located in a middle-class neighborhood – mediate and are mediated by crack use. Second, it examines how social relations are reconfigured, in the eyes of the users, after the arrival of the drug. Third, based on the users’ accounts, it examines the causality between crack use, street crime and homicide often emphasized in public discourse and medical research. By focusing on the complex processes in which crack use, street crime and homicides are embedded, the article problematizes such causalities and demonstrates the numerous actants involved, such as legal income-generating possibilities and public safety for crack consumers in the *favelas* and on the streets.

Key words

Brazil, crack, street, young people, homelessness, actor network theory

Author's note

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Crack ends it all, destroys a person's sanity, destroys the person's good spirit, destroys the person's family, destroys even life. Man, it ends it all like it was a demonic deep hole sucking it all into the ground.

Miguel (28 years)

Miguel spent long periods of his childhood and youth on the street in Barra, a middle-class neighborhood and tourist destination in Brazil's third largest city, Salvador. Eventually, he was introduced to crack cocaine (hereafter crack). He blamed his crack habit for severe weight loss and hospitalization some years later. At the time of my last fieldwork, Miguel was struggling to remain clean in order to take care of his girlfriend and son. Following Miguel and his peers in a street environment in urban Brazil over many years as part of my master's thesis and later for my PhD project, the presence of crack has become increasingly evident. Though it was not my intention to study this phenomenon in itself, digging more deeply into my empirical material, I came to realize that the street setting is greatly shaped by its encounter with crack.

The aim of this article is to increase understanding of the impact of crack among a hard-to-reach user group, namely young men on the street in urban Brazil. The focus is threefold. First, the article looks at how users' relationship with crack is mediated through socio-spatial contexts. Second, it explores how social relations have been reconfigured after the arrival of the drug. Third, it examines the users' accounts in regards to possible causality between crack, street crime and homicides. Both Miguel and his peers and crack originate in the *favelas*.¹ Thus the street's relationship with the *favelas* is also partly examined, in relation to drug trafficking and violence. There are mainly two destinies encountered in the empirical material: Miguel and other young men who grew up on the street and began using crack in the street environment, and young men who grew up in the *favelas*, began using crack and then went onto the street.

Public discourse tends to portray crack use as a consistent and stable phenomenon (see Dwyer & Moore, 2013). Yet, research in urban Brazil has demonstrated that there exists significant variation in the biochemical quality and composition of the drug (Oliveira & Nappo, 2008; Junior et al., 2012). Furthermore, Brazilian researchers report that there are many routes to administer the drug using a wide range of paraphernalia (Oliveira & Nappo, 2008). Crack can be mixed with either tobacco or marihuana, or used together with alcohol (Ribeiro, Sanchez, & Nappo, 2010). Although crack use is normally associated with compulsive binge patterns (Andrade et al., 2011), more controllable patterns of use have also been noted (Oliveira & Nappo, 2008). Comparative research within Brazil also shows geographical diversity in the average daily amount of crack consumed by users (Santos Cruz et al., 2013). Crack consumption in urban Brazil is therefore a manifold phenomenon.

Crack consumers are also often presented as a homogenous group (see Hartman & Golub, 1999). Both public discourse and medical research reports the typical Brazilian crack user as young, male, unemployed, having a low level of education and living in poor conditions (e.g. Andrade et al., 2011; Carvalho & Seibel, 2009; Dunn & Laranjeira, 1999). However, recent publications suggest that crack use is also common among women (Nunes, Andrade, Galvão-Castro, Bastos & Reingold, 2007) and that it is encountered in all social classes (Pedroso, Kessler & Pechansky, 2013). In research from the US, it has been suggested that crack gained media and political attention only when it became visible among a “dangerous” group, namely the poor and young, although it had been widespread among middle-class consumers for years (Reinarman & Levine, 1997). In Brazil, however, the opposite has been noted: it was when crack consumption spread to the upper classes that the ‘crack scare’ began (Romanini & Roso, 2012).

According to information from the federal and state authorities, as well as field studies and clinical reports, the use of crack in Brazil is on the rise (Carvalho & Seibel, 2009). In fact,

this expanding crack use has triggered a public health crisis and emergency measures (Andrade, Santiago, Amari, & Fischer, 2011). As in the US, crack has been demonized by abstinence-focused treatment services, “drug war” policies and the news media (Romanini & Roso, 2012; Roso et al., 2013). Romanini and Roso (2012) analyzed a series of reports about crack and found that crack was represented as having a life of its own, attacking the state, invading homes and destroying families. Crack was also perceived as the antithesis of alcohol, marihuana and cocaine in that it demoralized its users. The drug served as a scapegoat, and was seen as causing urban crime and violence. In line with this, the Secretary of Public Security in Salvador estimated that nearly 85% of the city’s homicides were related to the drugs war.² Medical research often supports such grim images of crack consumption. For instance, quantitative data emphasizes a strong correlation between crack use and property crime (e.g. Carvalho & Seibel, 2009; Dunn & Laranjeira, 1999; Pedroso, Kessler & Pechansky, 2013) and crack use and high mortality (e.g. Dias, Ribeiro, Dunn, Sesso & Laranjeira, 2008), portraying crack consumption as an action from which it is possible to derive such negative outcomes:

The crack/crime connection is persistent; a vast number of crimes are committed by crack addicts; crack use appears to intensify and perpetuate criminal activity [...] there is every reason to expect that ... new users will become involved in criminal behavior at an early age and will be at least as likely to engage in numerous criminal acts.

(Inciardi, McBride, McCoy & Chitwood, 1997, p. 147)

The result of establishing these causal associations is a picture of crack users as criminal and dangerous, stressing the need for repression as a priority instead of discussing health education, public policies and legislation (Noto, Pinsky, & Mastroianni, 2006).

Moreover, perceiving crack use as the sole cause of these actions fails to explain why the number of crack consumers who reported having been arrested for property theft was only

25% in Salvador and even significantly lower, at 6%, in Rio de Janeiro (Santos Cruz et al., 2013). Statistical data also often ignores how many of the consumers involved in crime engaged in such activities *prior* to crack use. The correlation between crack use and violence fails to explain why violence among crack consumers is widespread in Brazil, yet almost non-existent in Canada (Fischer, Cruz, Bastos, & Tyndall, 2013). Goldstein and colleagues (1997) found that the violence linked to crack use in the US was primarily the result of territorial disputes between rival dealers, not the result of any psychopharmacological properties of the drug. In Brazil, research has shown how the risks associated with crack consumption are often linked to the illegality of the drug and how users strategize in order to reduce the risks (Ribeiro, Sanchez, & Nappo, 2010).

Crack consumption in urban Brazil is increasingly a focus of academic research, which tends to focus on either drug trafficking or drug consumption, often creating a polarized division between the two. Research on drug trafficking is generally anchored in the social sciences (e.g. Souza, 2010; Soares, Bill, & Athayde, 2005; Zaluar, 2004), while research with drug users is normally based in medical disciplines (e.g. Carvalho & Seibel, 2009; Oliveira & Nappo, 2008; Dias, Ribeiro, Dunn, Sesso & Laranjeira, 2008). In medical research, drugs are often described in terms of their physical or psychological ‘effects’ and treated as the causes of other phenomena (Fraser & Moore, 2011), such as property crime and violence in the case of crack. By presuming such causality, other possible explanations are ignored. Furthermore, the surrounding environment and the complex social and spatio-temporal processes in which the user and the drug are embedded are disregarded.

Within the social sciences, pharmacological action is often reduced to inter-subjective interpretations (Gomart, 2002) in which the ontology of the drug is ignored. This entails that the actual substance is reduced to a blank signifier that is easily exchanged with other substances (Demant, 2009). A recent review stresses the one-dimensionality of most

sociological theories of drug addiction (Weinberg, 2011). In the last decade, alternative approaches have been employed in order to explore the *multiplicity* of the relation between drug, consumer and society (e.g. Dwyer & Moore, 2013; see also Law, 2004).

To create a platform for analysis that makes it possible to include more than one cause in the explanation while at the same time capturing how the drug and the user, non-human and human, act together, contemporary literature on substance use suggests using actor network theory (ANT), originally from science and technology studies (STS) (Demant, 2009; Duff, 2012; Weinberg, 2011). Gomart (2002), one of the pioneers of an STS approach to drugs, perceives methadone to be an ‘effect’, an action without a source, emphasizing that one cannot demarcate the effects of methadone from ‘the rest’. In line with this, Dwyer and Moore (2013) use an STS approach to explore consumer accounts of methamphetamine use in order to disentangle the causality between the drug and psychosis, empirically exemplifying the heterogeneity in the drug and the situatedness of its effects.

Drawing on the work of Barad (2003), Fraser and Moore (2011) emphasize that drugs are phenomena ‘continually remade in their intra-actions with other entities’ (p. 6). It is no use perceiving things as acting independently of each other or on each other, but rather as products of the encounter with each other:

The materiality of drugs matters, but so too do ideas, discourses, practices, histories and politics. All these produce each other and produce drugs, their effects and their circumstances. (Fraser & Moore, 2011, p. 6)

This approach is demonstrated in Keane’s (2013) study of tobacco and nicotine replacement therapy, where categories of good and bad nicotine rely on the assemblage of elements such as drug effects, technological and clinical innovations, habits of tobacco consumption, regulatory frameworks and the interests of both tobacco and pharmaceutical companies.

Keane (2002) also regards the addiction discourse as portraying drugs as powerful and with universal effects, as agents of addiction, physical disease and moral decline. In line with Keane's argument about the demonization of certain drugs (heroin and crack, in particular), Moore (2004) introduces the concept of 'drugalities' to explain how drugs are constructed, exemplifying how cocaine is presented as a recreational drug of status of the upper, middle-class, while crack is produced as a drug of desperation and stigma. 'Drugalities', Moore argues, are based on a combination of pharmacological, biological, historical, cultural, social, political and psychological features, and are thus also racialized, gendered and classed.

In the following section, a brief introduction to ANT will be given, before some of the methodological issues of the study are discussed. The main body of the article consists of four parts, each tightly connected to the interviewees' reflections and thoughts concerning crack consumption, and social environment, social relations, crime and homicides. It ends with some concluding remarks and recommendations.

Actor network theory and the study of drugs

The central tenet of ANT is to search for relationships, or rather networks, between everything relevant to the phenomenon under study. In this manner, ANT explores the relationality or the chain of relations. These networks consist of an eternal chain of connecting and connected actants (Latour, 2005). All actants – persons, objects, technology, practices, discourses, relations, organizations, and in this case drugs – have potential agency. Latour (2005) argues that, if an entity behaves or responds in such a way that it transforms the relations and activities in which it is embedded, it must be acknowledged that the entity has acted. This indicates that, although it may lack intentionality, it can still affect outcomes. He makes a distinction between intermediaries and mediators: the former are entities that make no difference, while the latter are entities that transform the network in some way. However,

the precise contribution of each actant is unclear because there is a lack of autonomy of action (Gomart, 2002). In this way, ANT closes the discussion between those who emphasize the agency of individual human actors and those who privilege the role of broader social and structural processes (Duff, 2012; Murdoch, 1998). In the case of drug consumption, ANT suspends the distinction between the drug, the user and the socio-cultural environment. One seeks to explain processes rather than substances, relations rather than entities (Duff, 2013). The actants perform reciprocally on each other, and ANT focuses on what *emerges* through these processes.

Whereas many researchers emphasize that the social context shapes substance consumption, according to Duff (2012), the ways in which context and consumption are related remain vague. ANT provides a basis for exploring the production and reproduction of context in relation to substance consumption. Duff reasons that substance consumption is a relational phenomenon that is organized and transformed in diverse actor networks. He argues that social contexts are formed in relation to substance consumption, and the contexts mediate this use. Similarly, by investigating two different methadone projects, Gomart (2002) was able to demonstrate how the drug itself does not contain fixed properties, but rather that effects emerge depending on the different actants at work in certain settings.

Substance consumption apparently includes both micro-level individual behavior and a macro-level social context in which the latter sets the parameters for the former by providing access and the opportunity for it to occur, as well as controlling and limiting its occurrence (Adrian, 2003). Duff (2012) argues that ANT bridges the gap between micro and macro in accounting for the dynamics of substance consumption. Because there are no insides and outsides to networks, but only associations and connections, geographical proximity and distance are irrelevant in ANT. It is networks that create and re-create proximity and distance, and they do so in both time and space.

Methodological approach

Before engaging in the empirical material, the methodological approach of this study will be outlined. This article is based on a longitudinal study incorporating three periods of fieldwork in Salvador conducted over a period of four years. Most of the data presented come from participant observation in the street environment of Barra, a residential area in Salvador, and narrative interviews with eleven young men from 18 to 28 years of age who lived or used to live on the street in this neighborhood. Of these, ten smoked or used to smoke crack, and about half of these had been involved in selling crack to finance their habit.

The interviews were semi-structured: a basic set of questions were asked of all interviewees to enable comparability and facilitate analysis. The outline of the interview included questions about personal trajectory, family life, relationship to drugs, crime, police, middle-class residents and tourists, reflections on their street situation, death and religion, and dreams for the future. Other relevant questions were developed as the conversation evolved. The validity of the interviews was cross-checked and elaborated through informal conversations and participant observation.

The research project was granted ethics approval by the Research Committee at the University of Nordland (reference number: 2010/1287). All interviewees were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and the possibility of withdrawal throughout the research process. Privacy and convenience were achieved by conducting the interviews at places and times chosen by the participants, and confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms in field notes, transcribed material and published texts.

People involved in the drugs trade and inhabiting the street environment often remain inaccessible to researchers (Moura, Sanchez, & Noto, 2010). Bourgois (2003) points out that marginalized individuals – such as drug users and dealers – distrust representatives of

mainstream society and will not reveal their intimate experiences of substance use or criminal enterprise to a stranger. He argues that it is only by establishing long-term relationships of trust that can one document the lives of these people. In this research, long-term engagement in the same street environment enabled sampling of the key participants through direct contact and further facilitated the interviewing process (see Ursin, 2013 for more on this).

The impact of crack on the street environment was heavily influenced by what was going on in the *favelas*. As Lien (2012) argues, since the practices are so diverse, fieldwork has to be conducted in multiple locations and situations where the reality is being created. Hence, in order to follow the actors (Latour, 1987), I carried out visits and engaged in informal conversations with young men involved in drug trafficking in a *favela*, a Protestant detoxification center and other urban regions saturated with drugs.

The main focus in this research is how crack transforms the everyday lives of people on the street. I therefore expanded my field until I felt I had discovered the putative mechanisms for holding the practices around crack and street user together (Law, 2012). By deciding where to draw the lines of the research, I managed to ‘construct a context in order to make sense of what is going on’ (Melhuus in Haualand, 2012, p. 291). At the same time, the methodological approach shaped the reality produced: ‘method always works not simply by detecting but also by amplifying a reality’ (Law, 2004, p. 16). Consequently, my methodological choices not only create a presence, but also an absence (things left out by exclusion) and Otherness (things left out by invisibility or ignorance) (Fraser & Valentine, 2008), which is worth bearing in mind as I turn to the empirical material.

Crack consumption and social environments

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime notes that the cocaine supply has increased in Brazil due to changes in international drug trafficking patterns (UNODC, 2011). The size of

the US market has shrunk dramatically over the last two decades, at same time as the opposite trend has been observed in Europe. With its geographical location between the cocaine-producing countries of Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, and the Atlantic Ocean, Brazil has become a popular transit country, and the number of seizures involving Brazil as a transit country has grown ten times in four years (UNODC, 2011).

Large amounts of cocaine began to arrive in metropolitan areas of Brazil, mainly São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, on its way to drug couriers boarding European flights. This new route, as well as new knowledge of how to produce crack, was then seized on as an opportunity to earn financial profit by local criminal networks. They were especially intrigued by the low cost of producing crack. In this way, changes in the global drugs market, Brazilian criminal networks and new production knowledge reconfigured cocaine – in the shape of crack – as a novel drug in the Brazilian drugs market.

Marihuana and cocaine have been distributed at specific drug sites – so-called *bocas de fumo* – in the *favelas* in Salvador for decades. These neighborhoods consist of informal housing surrounded by a labyrinth of often poorly illuminated streets, alleys and footpaths. Souza (2010) mentions four factors that contribute to making the *favelas* well suited to illegal activities, such as drug trafficking: (1) most *favelas* are located in vicinity of urban centers, facilitating the supply of and demand for drugs; (2) the complex network of alleys makes police control difficult and offers flight routes; (3) the irregular topography of the *favelas* allows drug dealers to monitor the entrances in case of police invasion; and (4) the large numbers of young residents facilitate the recruitment of drug users and dealers.

After the arrival of crack, the drug was added to the street dealers' list of available drugs, sometimes replacing the other drugs because of its growing popularity. Because of the ease of selling it and the financial profits involved, the number of people with interests in the crack business steadily increased, resulting in *bocas* rapidly mushrooming in the *favelas*. The

high levels of financial profit and access to weapons have intensified the drug market, making the drug traffickers increasingly willing to use armed violence to combat the police and rival cartels to defend and expand their territory. Lethal weapons thus play a particularly important role in the crack network, alongside modern communication technologies. The presence of drug trafficking is vividly contextualized in the interviews with young people in this research when they recalled their communities of origin. Some refer to this aspect of their local environment in a matter-of-fact way, like Alex (18 years), a former drug dealer in a distant *favela*:

Lately this neighborhood has become very violent – what runs things around here is the law of drug trafficking. [...] After eight o'clock it's they [drug traffickers] who are in command. It's dangerous outside... Some mornings over ten corpses are found.

The weapons are often supplied through international criminal networks, but there is also proof of corrupt police providing weapons. In fact, the inefficiency, violence and corruption of the Brazilian police can be interpreted as not only facilitating (by its absence in poorer communities) but also reinforcing drug trafficking (Hoelscher, in press).³

Crack not only saturates the *favelas*, it is also increasingly visible in the city centers in Salvador. Tomas (26 years) has lived on the street since before the drug's arrival. He explained how it gradually became more available on the drug market:

Before, she [crack] was something you'd had to look for. Today you don't look for her, she's looking for you. She comes to you even though you don't want her to.

As elsewhere, crack is easy to find in the neighborhood of this study. The cheapest crack is encountered in the *bocas* in the *favelas* encircling Barra, only walking distance from middle-class high rises, tourist attractions and chic hotels. Entering the *favelas* entails some risk

because of the armed drug dealers, and some crack consumers consciously avoid these *bocas*, like Jeronimo (20 years): ‘I stopped with that stuff, entering the *boca*, I don’t like entering *bocas* any more’. Like him, many prefer to buy crack at certain spots within Barra. These spots are ‘owned’ by a drugs cartel. One of the cartel’s drug distributors arrives by bus from a distant *favela* every night, delivering packages of crack to his employees. Most of these employees live in *favelas*, but some also live on the street in Barra. Their customers range from street dwellers to middle-class residents.

The young men in this study normally smoke crack after sunset, when the streets are gradually abandoned by middle-class residents (see Ursin, 2012 on the differences between day and night in public space in Barra). Crack is usually consumed in pairs or in groups, in partly hidden places, such as between parked cars, in staircases and in alleyways. Normally users look for money,⁴ buy crack and smoke it in cycles throughout the night. When they can afford it, they may also rent hotel rooms, where they consume drugs throughout the night.

Although crack is present in both the *favelas* and middle-class Barra, the ways in which crack affects and is affected by the social environment vary in these different socio-spatial contexts, making space itself an essential actant. In comparing Barra with the *favelas*, I will emphasize three essential differences regarding drug supply, income-generating opportunities and safety.

First of all, crack is easier to find and cheaper to buy in the *favelas* due to less interference by the police. Lucas (19 years) began smoking crack with his older brother when he was fifteen years of age and still living in his father’s house. After a while, he went with his brother to live in a *boca* nearby, realizing that hence their crack consumption increased: ‘[In the *boca*] we got even more addicted because this street only had users and drug trafficking’. However, most of the young men in this study smoked more crack in Barra than when visiting their former home communities. Victor (21 years) lived partly at home with his

father in a *favela* and partly on the street in Barra. He explained that he did not smoke crack at home because ‘When I go home I don’t feel that anxiety that I feel on the street [...] There I control myself’. Thus drug supply does not fully explain the details of individual crack use in a specific neighborhood.

To be able to use crack, the consumer usually needs to buy it. He thus needs money or other valuable, tradable goods. This takes us to the next difference between the *favelas* and Barra. Because of its prosperous residents, Barra offers more income-generating opportunities for poor people, ranging from shoe-shining to muggings. This makes it easier for crack users to sustain their habit. In fact, Alex revealed that some drug dealers in the *favelas* urge their broke costumers to descend to Barra to rob. Victor, who usually spent extended weekends on the street, linked his crack use to the ease of acquiring money in Barra:

It’s a place you quickly achieve money and such, do you understand? There are lots of different people, tourism and stuff, whatever you do, you gain money. Even the information you give, you gain change. [...] To gain even just one *real* [R\$] is difficult in our neighborhood.

He also emphasized that it is easier to gain money legally in Barra, compared to trafficking drugs in the *favelas* as he used to do. This access to money was the main reason for Victor to smoke in Barra. Moreover, he reckoned that he actually earned more money *because* of his crack use:

I also think I achieve this [100 *reais* daily] because of the drug, because this drug, when you use it, it gives you the desire [to use more], so you start looking for things to do [to earn more money].

He explained that he is satisfied with the money he earns when he avoids spending it on crack, and therefore he does not look for money throughout the night as he does when he is

smoking. Ruben (28 years) also linked his crack use with easy access to money: ‘When a person is feeling the desire [to use], the money just starts appearing out of the blue’. In this way, income-generating opportunities do not only facilitate individual crack consumption, but crack use also amplifies (perceived) income-generating opportunities.

Equally important when discussing the differences between Barra and the *favelas* in the views of the users are the safety issues. When Lucas and his brother moved to the *boca*, they also began committing burglaries. They gradually gained a bad reputation in the community. Afraid of reprisals, Lucas fled to the city center. Some weeks later his brother, who refused to do likewise, was killed. Lucas eventually ended up in Barra, minding cars. He knew many who chose the street over family homes because of their drug use, claiming that the street made them feel more comfortable. In Barra, Lucas coincidentally met a former neighbor:

He used to live in my street and owed the drug dealer, and that’s why he doesn’t live at home anymore. [...] If he goes to their area, they’ll kill him. [...] They know he’s here, but it isn’t possible to come here and kill, you understand? This is a place which has security, police everywhere, security guards who like us.

Nicholas (28 years) also confirmed this trend: ‘some have debts in the *bocas de fumo* and come to Barra to hide’. The perceived safety of Barra must be seen in relation to the risks of the *favelas* (see also Ursin, 2011). Due to political priorities, Barra stands in stark contrast to the *favelas*, with several police stations, 24-hour street patrols, private security guards in most of the buildings, street lighting, and a more open and transparent public space. Barra is also a commercial and residential area where there exist opportunities to develop a social network of ‘important people’ among middle-class residents and traders for young people on the street.

Such networks also enable feelings of safety (Ursin, 2011). I will return to the safety aspect later since safety is also essential with regard to social relations on the street.

Although the *favelas* have more and cheaper drugs, the majority of those I interviewed associated Barra with their crack consumption. Both Victor and Jeronimo avoided smoking when in their families' houses, and most of the young men disappeared from Barra while trying to quit. As Jeronimo reasoned:

In prison, he [the crack user] reflects, he forgets crack and thinks about his life: "I'm imprisoned, I can't smoke crack, I'm jailed, if I smoke crack I will do some crazy stuff". [I]n Barra you can't find a guy who quit using drugs [...] because there is always someone who passes and shows him drugs.

Even though Jeronimo considered himself addicted to crack, he reasoned that this feeling of addiction is tightly connected to his presence in Barra. In a prison setting, where drug supply, income-generating opportunities and safety issues are quite different, he would have calculated the risks involved and avoided crack. His conclusion is that you have to leave Barra in order to quit. This shows how the young men's crack consumption is mediated through the socio-spatial characteristics of Barra and how their feelings of addiction are reconfigured in this context.

Crack consumption and social relations

Many of the crack-smoking young men in this research described how crack changed their relationships with the mainstream society, and reconfigured the young men's relations to other users of public space in Barra. Miguel left his mother's house as a seven-year-old, and spent his childhood and adolescence in institutions and on the street. He had known Barra and its residents for almost twenty years, living and/or working on these streets. Even when living with his newly constituted family in a *favela* an hour away by bus, he still depended on Barra

to survive, minding cars at his fixed spot. Looking back on his childhood and youth, he remembered:

It used to be a lot of residents here who would come out, giving food, clothes, medicines. Now it's turning into a dog's world. After the fucking crack arrived here in Salvador, it ended it all.

He reasoned that the residents stopped helping the young people on the street because they realized that everything was sold to buy crack. If a resident gave sandals to a youngster, Miguel reflected, he would turn it into crack, and the youngster would continue to go barefoot and freezing.

Less charity and good will from the surroundings was not the only change: many of the young men also felt more stigmatized after people discovered that they were smoking crack. As Jeronimo concluded, 'It all changed when I began using drugs. That's when the shit got really different'. Jeronimo came to Barra as a teenager. Although he managed to stay away from both crack and crime for several years, obtaining a formal job at a kiosk, he eventually started using. He later lost his job and, together with Victor, became notorious for assaulting tourists. Jeronimo stated:

When I only smoked marihuana – lots of rich people smoke [marihuana], right? – the rich guys used to call me over to buy for them [...] When I started to smoke crack, I lost the few good friendships I had.

In his mind, the middle-class young men who sometimes sought his company to acquire marihuana now avoided him because he was associated with crack. He stresses crack as opposed to marihuana, where the former drug represents marginality and the latter inclusion in mainstream society. In this way, he reproduces public discourse. Jeronimo added: 'We're the ones excluding ourselves from society and approximating marginality'. He does not

consider the demonization of crack and discrimination of its users as stigmatizing acts of mainstream society, but rather accepts the general view of the drug and inculpates the users. In this, crack is not a main mediator, but rather the public discourse on crack, prevalent in the Brazilian media, that presents crack users as immoral and criminal. As crack has become the scapegoat of many urban ills in Brazil, one's relationship to crack influences one's position in society alongside variables such as powerful/powerless and law-abiding/criminal. Crack users are often defined as the 'bottom element' within drug-culture hierarchies (Andrade et al., 2011; Bourgois, 2003), as well as in society in general. Jeronimo put it like this:

Crack is discriminated against by everyone, from the thief to the drug dealer, from the businessman to whomever else. [...] No one wants to stay close to someone who smokes crack.

Jeronimo's companion, Victor, reasoned that the middle-class residents of the area distanced themselves not only because of prejudice, but also out of fear. He argued that 'most of them should fear us, because they have money, and they know that the drug is capable of everything'. The young men's crack use reshaped the relations of trust between them and their surroundings, relations which are essential in coping on the street because they facilitate access to money, food, fresh water, clothes, and bathing and sleeping arrangements (see Ursin, 2012). In this way, the public discourse is a mediator not only in producing fear and prejudice in the encounter with the middle-class residents, it also works as a mediator when Jeronimo and Victor reproduce the same discourse, acknowledging that the crack users are 'capable of everything'. When the young men on the street start smoking crack, their relations to the surroundings are modified by three actants: The individual and situated effect which the drug might potentiate (e.g. aggressiveness and criminal behavior), the public discourse of

crack users as dangerous and immoral, and the users' negotiation of this discourse. The interrelation between these is further discussed below.

Crack consumption and street crime

The majority who smoked crack in this study were involved in assaults, robberies and burglaries to finance their crack habit (Ursin, 2012). Many of them also perceived crack as causing them to commit these crimes. As Raoul (24 years) explained: 'crack is different from marihuana because it makes you want to rob, it makes you want to smoke over and over again'. In his view, the urge to rob was a direct effect of smoking crack and the resulting cravings. Jeronimo and Lucas also attributed their involvement in property crime to their crack use. However, this causal explanation was challenged by Ruben, a respected figure in Barra due to his avoidance of thefts and assaults:

They want to use too much and they don't want to work to consume the drugs, they want to rob to use drugs. It's not crack which encourages [the robberies], it's their own greed. [...] If I, by working, manage to feed my necessity to use drugs, why should I rob?

Ruben thus refused to be reduced to an intermediary by the drug. Similarly, others I met defined the users who were involved in crime as having 'weak mentality', attributing their criminal acts to personality flaws, and avoidance of such behavior as a result of strong personal character.

Raoul reportedly felt an urge to rob when having smoked crack. Victor also linked committing assaults with being high on crack, which brought out feelings of courage:

[I do assaults] alone only when I have smoked crack. [...] There are times when you're seeing stuff, imagining things, [then] I get scared. But there are times when you smoke you get a vision which gives you more courage.

Ruben, on the other hand, said that he only felt sensations of fear. These feelings made him avoid criminal behavior: 'It's the drug of fear, it inspires me *not* to do anything wrong'. The effects of smoking crack are therefore manifold and situated, and always created in the encounter between the crack, the user, his previous experiences and present expectations, and the socio-spatial setting in which it is embedded.

Yet, the public discourse on crack represents the drug as having a destructive will, making it possible to blame crack for immoral behavior. As Ruben points out, 'crack addiction' has become an excuse to behave badly. He aligns it with blaming crime and involvement in drugs on family conflicts:

Crack doesn't influence anyone, Marit, a lot of people throw the guilt on others. When it's not on crack, it's on the family. "My family doesn't love me, my family doesn't accept me, my family doesn't want me". Damn family, fuck the family! When it concerns family, when thinking of family, raise your head and go to work!

In the encounter between the crack user and public discourse portraying the crack user as immoral and criminal, a new actant emerges, namely 'crack addiction' as an intentional or unconscious excuse for criminal behavior. Furthermore, public discourse on the crack user reinforces and is reinforced by the traditional perception of poor, young men residing in the *favelas* as unpredictable, dishonest and dangerous (Ursin, 2006). In this way, the derogatory symbolic value of crack has come to epitomize poor, young men in urban Brazil.

Lucas, who had already lost his brother due to his bad reputation in his former neighborhood, was conscious not to commit the same error in Barra. By working honestly, washing and minding cars, he managed to establish a clientele that trusted him:

People like me because I don't rob. I'm not an ignorant person. I know how to arrive at a place. My fault is that I use this drug.

Lucas regards his crack use as something negative, but he is able to work honestly to sustain his use, even though he used to engage in property crime in his former neighborhood. This shows, once again, that space and income-generating opportunities are important actants, making this network in which Lucas is now embedded different from previous networks. Another mediating actant is probably Lucas' memory of gaining a bad reputation and losing his brother. Lucas' case also shows that noted crack consumption in itself does not necessarily cause discrimination, as Jeronimo felt. In networks that include crack, user, public discourse on crack and middle-class residents, but substitutes the user's reputation as criminal with a reputation as honest and hardworking, feelings of acceptance and sympathy among the residents might emerge.

Another actant in networks including street crime among crack users was mentioned in Raoul's interview. He was explaining how drug dealers give a literal deadline for the user to pay his debt, when his female companion replied: 'Then they're forcing you to rob'. In this way, she interpreted the death threats made by the drug dealers as mediating actants in property crime. Property crime was not the result of a pharmacological urge created within the crack user, but rather something that emerged in the encounter between crack user, crack dealer, debt, access to weapons and the local moral codes of drug trafficking, including selling drugs on credit, issuing death threats and executing indebted users.

Although these accounts do not answer the question of what causes some crack users to commit property crime, they problematize a causal relationship between crack use and crime by demonstrating other possible explanations.

Crack consumption and homicides

In Jeronimo's view, in the encounter between the user and crack, the drug ends up as the mediator, taking control of the user's impulses. He realized that this put him in a dangerous

position, admitting: ‘I don’t want to rob, because I know that a lot of people are watching me [...], wanting to kill me’. Irrespective of whether crack causes criminal behavior or not, noted involvement in property crime increases the list of enemies among victims, the police and informal security forces.⁵ Jeronimo recounted one episode with regard to this:

[A middle class resident] told me that he orders killings. He looked at me like this, Marit, and said: “Good bandits in Barra, you have to eliminate them”, and I – in panic, having just smoked crack – I just looked at him and said: “Lucky I’m still alive”.

Although crack might cause paranoid feelings, those who are involved in crime have reason to be careful. In fact, Ruben revealed that the members of an informal security force had confronted him, asking if they could eliminate Jeronimo and Victor. Such threats and requests were not always empty; some of their street peers had already been killed because of similar behavior (Ursin, 2012).

As already mentioned, drug debt in *bocas* also caused mortal risks. Raoul described the attitude of a drug dealer if the user was unable to pay his debt:

“Within a week, I want my money”, he says, because if the guys fool them, they kill them right away. Or he says, “I’ll give you a deadline. I want my money within half an hour. If not, don’t come back at all”.

Similar risks were associated with engaging in drug trafficking. Selling crack in Barra, Raoul once hastily threw his drugs away as the police suddenly appeared. Not being able to re-pay the drugs cartel, he was shot several times in the abdomen. A security guard on nightshift in an apartment building witnessed the shootings and called an ambulance. Raoul recovered and returned to the street. He continued to smoke crack, but avoided both Barra and drug trafficking. At about the same time, another young man was set up by a street companion: he was invited to smoke crack on the breakwater in Barra late one night when his companion ran

off, allegedly to get something. Meanwhile, two men appeared and shot him. The word on the street was that he died because he insisted on selling crack independently and not for the dominant drug cartel.

Milton (22 years) grew up in Barra, but had returned to live in a shack close to his family on the city's periphery. Although he sniffed glue daily as a minor, he had never tried crack. In his view, involvement in the crack trade always had mortal consequences:

These guys who use drugs, their destiny is one only: Either they die smoking or they die becoming a drug dealer. That's the only way out of it.

It is evident that involvement in the drugs trade in urban Brazil, whether as dealer, user or both, entails mortal risks. However, the causality between crack – use and/or trafficking – and homicides remains to be explored. In many of the interviews, action is 'passed' as crack is foregrounded and other actants are backgrounded (Gomart, 2002) when it comes to negative outcomes, such as crime and homicide. Miguel stated that crack 'destroys even life'.

Similarly, Jeronimo reflected, whoever killed someone for whatever cause, it always came down to involvement in drugs:

Look, who is killing is the drug, the involvement in drugs. If it was because of theft, they stole to use drugs. If it was the police, they used drugs and got spelled by the magic [meaning not taking precautions]. If it was the drug dealer, they scammed the drug dealer. But it has always something to do with drugs.

Jeronimo touches on a vital aspect. Crack is often an essential actant in the networks in which acts of homicide emerge. But as no actant can act alone, crack is not solely responsible for the high homicide rates among crack-involved young men in urban Brazil. As Ruben argued:

You hear people saying "crack kills quickly". That's a lie! Do you know what kills quickly? Their greed [...] Crack doesn't influence much. In the majority of the cases,

the crack isn't to blame. [...] There are men who already want to do bad things against others. This is their proper will.

Ruben further explained that he survived on the street because he never let the drug control him and thus refused, once again, to be reduced to an intermediary by the drug. Nicholas stressed that it is the combination between the individual and the drug which has dangerous potential:

This drug was made for demonized people: those who already have the devil on their shoulders. Thus crack already arrived killing aplenty.

Both Ruben and Nicholas emphasized how the moral character of the people involved, both those who were killed (due to theft or debt) and those who killed, was an important actant.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, research within the medical disciplines often emphasizes a causal relation between the use of crack, crime and homicide. Although crack may be enrolled in many networks in which street crime and homicide emerge in urban Brazil, the causal line needs to be explored with measures other than solely quantitative studies. Based on narrative interviews with eleven young men who either lived or used to live on the street in urban Brazil, and participant observation in this setting, this article has investigated the complexity of the relation between crack use, crime and homicide. It demonstrates that there are many actants involved – crack as substance; individual user attitudes, mentality, self-control, experiences and expectations; public discourse on crack and its users; social relations characterized by inclusion and trust, but also by avoidance, stigma, and fear; income-generating possibilities for poor, uneducated young men; and perceived safety (i.e. the presence of police and security guards).

The actants are affected by and affect each other continuously in intricate ways. Crime and homicides emerge (or do not emerge) in certain networks which some or all of these actants are involved (in addition to other actants that are excluded or unknown). For instance, the socio-spatial context of Barra, providing ways of earning money legally for street dwellers, although consuming drugs, and offering a higher level of public safety due to presence of police and security guards, enables Ricardo and Ruben to work honestly and consume drugs. By working honestly, relations of inclusion and trust with the surroundings emerge. In these networks, where property crime is excluded, crack as substance and public discourse on crack users appear as intermediaries, and homicides are less frequent. Yet, the network are reconfigured if Ricardo or Ruben, for instance, become indebted in the *bocas* or start trafficking drugs as new actants are enrolled in the networks. The networks are never static, but rather distinct, complex, malleable and interactive, constituted and re-constituted by the relationships between the actants, and the enrolling of new and disappearing of old actants.

Crime and homicides can also be actants, changing and being changed by the networks in which they are embedded. For instance, Jeronimo and Victor engage in property crime to sustain their crack habit while on the street. In addition to their noted drug use and public discourse on crack users, noted crime involvement impacts their relations to the surroundings, where attitudes of avoidance, stigma and fear emerge. This again reconfigures the socio-spatial context, in particular in regards income-generating possibilities (because these often are based on trust) and safety (as law-breakers, the presence of police and security guards no longer represents safety) (see also Ursin, 2012). In such networks, crack as substance appears to be a mediator (causing an urge or courage to rob). Homicides may (but not necessarily) occur.

This article thus shows how the three dimensions explored in the article, the socio-spatial contexts, the social relations (that produce and are produced by the socio-spatial context), and presence/absence of crime and homicide, are in mutual dependency to each other. As mentioned earlier, the easy access to firearms and the high financial profit of the crack trade are also actants in these networks, alongside the moral codes and attitudes of local drug traffickers, police forces and informal security forces, who – in the majority of the cases – carry out the executions. Furthermore, the way of policing (or absence of it), investigating homicides involving street people, and prosecuting the guilty is also of importance.

By using actor network theory, this study of crack consumption focuses on relations and seeks to explore processes in which this consumption is embedded. It thus emphasizes the situatedness of crack consumption and other phenomena often linked to this, such as street crime or homicides. By doing this, it problematizes understandings of causality often advanced in public discourse and medical studies. For instance, level of drug supply does not solely explain level of drug consumption in a specific area. Moreover, crack consumption in itself is not able to explain the phenomena habitually linked to it. The study does not reveal a clear answer of the causes of these phenomena, but rather demonstrates their complexity and the numerous actants potentially involved. Thus the result indicates that the political prioritization of aggressive policing which solely aims to eradicate crack supply – popular among politicians, media and the upper classes in urban Brazil – will not resolve street crime or homicides. A broader focus on the socio-spatial context of these phenomena is required, strengthening positive factors, such as increased legal income-generating possibilities and public safety for crack-consumers in the *favelas* and on the street. Additionally, the development of a less stigmatizing and more nuanced public debate on crack consumption is highly advisable, as the derogatory images of public discourse seem to contribute to further marginalization of crack consumers.

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Notes

¹ Poor communities in urban Brazil.

² *A Tarde* (local newspaper), 8.1.09.

³ By doing research primarily with drug traffickers, rather than drug users as in this study, these actants would probably have become more apparent.

⁴ They earn money by doing favors, watching parked cars, recycling garbage, stealing, assaulting, etc.

⁵ Informal security forces are established by police, ex-police, security guards, etc. and often take the law into their own hands. They are paid by affluent traders and residents to keep the area 'clean', often including executions of 'disturbing elements', such as drug users, drug traffickers, the homeless and petty criminals, hence their nickname, *grupos de extermínio* (death squads). This phenomenon is common, especially in areas where crime rates are high and the official police lack sufficient resources.