ORIGINAL STUDY

Reciprocity on Skid Row

Christopher Hauch

Introduction: The Myth of the Squandering Squatter

It seems that whenever a skid row resident encounters money, his first and overriding inclination is to squander it. Receiving a welfare cheque or other lump sum, such as an income-tax refund, the skid row man will commence swift and unrestrained consumption of the most frivolous, extravagant purchases, and treat himself and his companions to long episodes of inebriation. This phenomenon is known as "binge spending," and appears to be a pan–North American skid row tradition.

Considering the prevalence of poverty on skid row, the practice of binge spending seems economically irrational. Western social scientists have traditionally interpreted it as evidence of a psychopathology. The "symptom" is repeated failure to plan for the long term. This disorder, typically associated with the "culture of poverty" model, is characterized as a pathological fixation on life-in-the-present, and it is called "nondeferred gratification."

The concept of nondeferred gratification has dominated explanations of spending practices in urban poverty areas for nearly three decades. As a result, many treatment facilities for skid row alcoholics take great pains to teach money-management skills. Furthermore, most welfare departments in the United States and Canada maintain a policy of withholding aid from known practitioners of this "aberrant" spending behaviour. As a result, skid row people seldom benefit from income security programs.

Nevertheless, there may be more to binge spending than meets the distant critical eye. During several years' ethnographic research of skid row in Winnipeg, I discovered evidence suggesting that binges may provide selective advantages to their practitioners. The base for this research was the Main Street Project, a government-funded outreach program and emergency shelter.

As the study progressed, the ecology of skid row emerged as one so radically different from that of the world surrounding it that differences in behaviour became more understandable. In some ways, the adaptive pressures on residents of skid row resembled those of foraging groups like the Ju/'hoansi. Analogues to several of skid row's economic customs, including binge spending, are found in the ethnography of many foraging peoples.

Hard Work Does Not Pay

Winnipeg's skid row is similar to those found elsewhere in North America. As attested by its decaying turn-of-the[-20th]-century buildings, it is the city's historic centre, the onetime nucleus of its trade. Skid row is the home of the city's poorest and most disaffiliated, among whom many drunkards and a few of the mentally ill are conspicuous. The population of skid row was defined as including all the homeless frequenters of the area during the five-year period of the study.

The population was quite homogeneous and displayed remarkable consistency over time. The most prominent characteristic was a lack of marketable skills. In Winnipeg, skid row residents tended to have marginal schooling, and were able to compete only for scarce short-term labour positions. Unskilled labour experiences dominated typical "pre-skid row" employment histories.

Almost all residents were male, most of them between the ages of 35 and 50. Three-quarters of the population were First Nations men, a statistic that remained stable over the years. Of the Whites, the majority were transient labourers whose first homes had been in traditionally impoverished parts of the country.

While the demography remained stable, the turnover rate in some years was 60 percent of the entire population. First Nations residents who were able to, returned to their home reserves from time to time. Some found full-time work, or relocated to other skid rows. More fell victim to sickness, and were absorbed into an otherwise inaccessible social service support system. Others were imprisoned, and during my stay, many died. Literally, tens of thousands came and went over the few years' duration of the research.

All my informants were well acquainted with homelessness and, recounting their experiences, expressed fear at its prospects. The homeless endured sickness, injury, and death as ordinary consequences both of the severe Winnipeg winters and of violence in all its conceivable forms. No sane person would volunteer for all this suffering. The business of securing shelter and provision and, ultimately, an escape from skid row dominated daily life.

While life-threatening poverty came as no surprise, the "business" of circumventing it did. Initially, the presumption was that petty crime, social agency usage, and scavenging provided the baseline skid row subsistence. It turned out that all were indeed part of the broad repertoire of local survival strategies. Beyond that, it was discovered that the population was also a working one, almost to a man. Moreover, unlike crime, for example, which appeared to be largely against each other, and hence redistributive in nature, legitimate employment seemed by far the most common means of actually creating wealth for the society.

Steady jobs were nonexistent. Securing one usually implied the worker's departure from skid row. Everyone worked, however sporadically, for the very specialized network of casual-labour offices. Survival depended on it. It was in the structure of this skid-row-based industry that part of the explanation for local spending behaviour lay.

The men were retained by a casual-employment office, and they were both paid and dismissed at day's end. There was no job security and few of the benefits that normally attend full-time employment. This type of labour recruitment is known as "spot jobs"—the work of urban nomads.

Casual labour agents enlisted skid row men to work, offering them minimum wages. The labour of these men was then "sold"—by the day—to secondary purchasers for fees roughly equivalent to what the market hourly wage might be, were the position permanent and unionized. The secondary purchaser never had any obligation beyond the one-day contract and thus, over the long term, was able to adjust wage output closely to subtle variations in staffing requirements.

Due to the poverty prevalent on skid row, nearly all men, including the chronically ill, made at least periodic use of the market for casual labour. For the few fortunate who were hired, the jobs available varied in the extreme. Some small businesses required snow removal; others wanted flyers to be delivered or simple construction tasks to be performed. On better days, large contracts might be posted. The major rail companies, for example, are, by necessity, regular customers. A train entering Winnipeg may be required to pick up or discharge a single large load quickly. The task is labour intensive and it involves far more men than could be retained on a permanent basis.

Casual jobs were both temporary and unpleasant; in addition, they were almost invariably futureless. Labourers rarely enjoyed an opportunity to impress supervisors and ascend any single organizational hierarchy. Work was sparse and poorly paid. A review of annual income records revealed that the successful labourers earned about half the minimum wage for 52 weeks. Dependence upon casual labour was a condemnation to a clearly marginal subsistence.

How the Poor Pay More

Even so, the low incomes of skid row habitués were not alone responsible for the widespread chronic homelessness. Although modest, they were rarely much lower than those which many university students, living in residence, subsist on. And like university campuses, skid row was replete with outlets in which all manner of goods and services could be purchased at modest prices. Monthly rentals for hotels and rooming houses were low. Meals were inexpensive, as were the clothing and housewares sold in local thrift stores.

Rather, casual labour was only one of the necessary conditions for extreme poverty. Another was skid row's sheltering industry, the sum of all rented accommodations, which ironically not only profited from homelessness but actively promoted it, in certain creative ways.

Two distinct groups live on skid row—in a sense, two types of severely poor. One consists of all those who receive income in orderly, predictable disbursements. Some are elderly men, in particular those whose sole incomes derive from federal pension programs. Others are the recipients of long-term disability payments, modest trust funds, and so on. The second, larger, group consists of all those who rely on sporadic incomes. Some are full-time criminals, but by far the majority are casual labourers—the true, conspicuous skid row residents. Neither group can boast a superior average income. Yet the latter's poverty is ostensibly the deeper. Among

labourers, homelessness is the norm, while steady earners, though generally doomed to squalid conditions, appear all but immune to the experience.

The paradox was explained during this study, in that each group was charged rent at a different rate. Steady earners were able to raise capital once per month. They shopped for the best accommodations that a reasonable portion of their incomes allowed for. Accordingly, skid row landlords set monthly rates that were equitable, or at least befitting of their products' characteristically substandard quality.

Casual labourers, on the other hand, were paid intermittently throughout the month. The most lucrative strategy for landlords was to charge rent with equal intermittence. No man was ever advanced a room against his agreeing to pay at that month's end. If unable to make full payment in advance, he was forced to a daily rate. On the average, daily hotel rates in the area reached up to seven times those normally paid by steady earners, or about 65 to 80 percent of a labourer's net daily income. If a labourer worked one day, then he was able to secure one day's shelter; if not, he was homeless.

Rooming houses provided no sanctuary. No daily rate was offered, and worse, tenants were required to supply damage deposits in advance of occupancy. The only remaining option was to stay at the Salvation Army hostel, which, unlike the hotels, did provide a reasonable daily rate. Those who could provide 30 days' rent in advance were entitled to a private, locked room, a place where they could store possessions. All others were crowded into dormitories where storage was impossible and theft inevitable. Whatever portable surplus a man had, be it money remaining from the day's wages or expensive belongings, was quickly lost to equally needy men. Thus, hotels were usually preferred.

Giving and Receiving

In the midst of such dire and seemingly intractable circumstances, it seems little but brutality and fierce individualism—Hobbe's "war of all against all"—could prevail. Brief visits to skid row strengthen the notion. The people we saw seemed all but inured to life's daily perils. Their society at once strikes us as tenuous and unstructured in the extreme. Penetrating skid row, however, one finds widespread evidence of altruistic behaviour. The culture contains only a few proscriptions regarding violence and there is an intense, universal commitment to philanthropy, articulated in the expression "you can't turn people down on the street."

The expression is more than a platitude: It summarizes economic life. Gestures of kindness and sharing, among men so uniformly impoverished, were routinely observed. Prior relationship is rarely a factor in the decision to give, so long as the remotest affiliation with skid row is confirmed. Such gestures are not accompanied by sentiment. No message of obligation, even to return thanks, is imposed on the receiver. Similarly, when receiving, no sense of obligation is displayed.

At first, this made for tremendously frustrating ethnography. Poverty on this scale, it was expected, would surely stimulate some sort of internal economic organization—perhaps intragroup support networks and stratification and commodity distribution rules. No such formal culture or organization existed. Goods flowed freely throughout the community, unhampered by any discernible structure. Residents provided for one another unhesitatingly in times of need. No direct mode of repayment was ever implicit in transactions: sometimes all parties presumed that they would never meet again.

Yet, there were two pervasive constants in the economy, unspoken practices that appeared to govern all exchange-related behaviour. First, while generosity was valued, severe punishments were exacted on misers. Everyone seemed aware that deprivation had the potential for occasioning great hazards, even death. On this basis, most tended to interpret hoarding as an act of extreme hostility and isolationism. Those who came upon wealth and did not share it were routinely beaten and robbed. If caught several times, they were ostracized.

The second was that skid row people were willing to tolerate prolonged asymmetrical exchange. For example, those few who were physically incapable of working, but who had not yet qualified for state aid, could be sustained for lengthy periods solely by the generosity of their fellows. In time, of course, this would tend to strain relations. Such was inevitable in so marginal an economy. Here, the remedial sanction was more subtle in nature. Violence was never automatic; nor, after suffering near countless requests for aid, did anyone conspicuously act the miser. Instead, gossip would ignite and, feeding upon widespread discontent, would punish its victims with increasingly mean criticisms. Mental status was most frequently

involved few people and frivolous purchases. Alcohol was especially favoured, often being the focus of days-long parties from which participants occasionally required clinical detoxification.

Further, the hosts to a sizable binge often exhibited great braggadocio. Announcing new-found wealth, the men boasted of their limitless philanthropy, distributing cash on the street, in bars, and even throwing it away and proclaiming, "It means nothing to me." Attracting a circle of friends and relatives, in short order, the generous host would vent self-aggrandizement, spending furiously as if to confirm each claim of greatness.

A comparatively large sum (for example, a $500 income-tax refund) afforded no special advantage to the individual skid row resident since it could never be saved, given the omnipresent threat of robbery. Nor was it sufficient to make possible a permanent relocation away from skid row to a place where miserliness would not have been a cultural taboo. The expression "Money means nothing to me" was an astute appraisal of the dilemma. Unlike possible analogues in smaller egalitarian societies, such windfalls are useless in meeting even the most basic immediate needs of the group, because of the great number of potential, nearby receivers.

Large windfalls had to be redistributed to many, so that no one became conspicuously wealthier than another. The giver was in a tenuous social position. He might have attempted to make like-sized donations to a few people of his choice, but this would invariably appear as the intended exclusion of those who received nothing. Besides, should one so overlooked wish to avenge violently the giver's snub, no one would come to his assistance for fear of appearing "paid off."

Binge spending was the perfect solution. Coming into a large sum, the recipient commenced a swift and indiscriminate distribution. As quickly as possible he purchased food, liquor, and gifts of myriad description, showing no preference for binge participants, but donating randomly to anyone who happened by. Further, as if abrogating publicly any subsequent obligation of receivers, the host boasted of his great generosity, impressing upon all his belief in the virtues of sharing and fellowship, and showing contempt for money. The host almost insisted that no one leave feeling in any way indebted to him. Thus, the louder his boasting the better, as those friends and relatives who heard too late of his spree to get their share could bear no grudge based on miserliness.

The use of alcohol during a binge provided an additional advantage. Often, former hosts would report having "lost a couple of days" during a binge, meaning that their memory of the episode had been impaired by sustained drinking. On occasions on which relatives protested their exclusion from binges, this would frequently be used as a defence. Often this would placate the accuser.

Binges are adaptive responses to the problem of distributing large sums on skid row. Quick wealth is an accident on skid row, one which places the recipient in great physical danger. Thus, the spontaneous spending of it is a matter of group enforcement, having no greater purpose than to afford the safest and most equitable division, and swiftest consumption.

Binges are clearly not exercises in frivolous indulgence, or evidence of the skid row people's inability to plan for the long term. A memorable skid row spending spree witnessed during the research illustrates this point. The host, V, had sustained serious and permanent injury to both legs because of an accident during casual labour. Hoping to avert a lawsuit, the purchasing industry offered, while V was still hospitalized, a single lump sum, some $3000, in compensation. V quickly agreed to the offer and, discharging himself from care at the encouragement of friends, began a long and unrestrained bout of partying in the skid row hotel district. Within a week, V was both penniless and unemployable.

The episode might well have been attributed to a lack of money-management skills and disregard for personal health. My experience with V then, and for three years subsequently, proved very much the contrary. Immediately after distributing his windfall, V applied for and received permanent welfare assistance for reasons of physical disability. Every month he received a cheque, again a lump sum. He used this to leave skid row. Although he occasionally visited the skid row area later, he was seldom observed intoxicated, or even patronizing the local taverns. Instead, given a secure income, V managed a largely sedentary style of life, living alone, and exhibiting great aptitude for budgeting a decidedly modest income.

targeted. Long time suppliants would suddenly earn reputations as "crazies," dangerous and unpredictable lunatics. As such a reputation swelled, so too usually did ostracism. Progressive poverty, illness, and ultimate rescue by welfare agencies, or hospitals, marked the typical downward sequence.

In essence, this was the extent of economy. On the one hand there was one overriding cultural value: that wealth ought always to be shared and that the act of sharing justifies neither complacence nor gratitude. Two powerful sanctions prevailed: one directed at enforcing the former law and another at curtailing its abuse.

At first, the system appeared disorganized, or at best, rife with cultural contradictions. In fact, these traits define a well-known economic institution: generalized reciprocity. There seems to be an almost eerie likeness between the material constraints of skid row and those found in the egalitarian foraging societies where anthropologists document generalized reciprocity.

Generalized reciprocity was likely the earliest form of human economic organization. Wherever it exists, the institution displays essentially the features described above. Most characteristically, there are no ironclad rules of private ownership. All members of the society are producers, in one specialty or another. All goods entering the society are viewed as belonging to all people. No overt mechanism exists to calculate debt or capital. No immediate reckoning of any kind occurs to figure out one's right of access in relation either to ascribed status or ostensible productivity.

At once, the system reveals a somewhat innate beneficence. Despite severely marginal ecosystems, all inhabitants contribute to the welfare of the nonproductive members as well as their own. Residents cling to one another for daily support, as sparse resources are distributed to a meagre but usually comfortable and equitable baseline.

The driving force of this arrangement is not pure altruism. Everyone is expected to both produce and distribute at least intermittently—to maintain balance over the long term. Failing this, hard sanctions are eventually brought to bear. Also, generalized reciprocity is sustained under material conditions that severely frustrate the accumulation of surplus and the appearance of social and economic stratification.

One of these conditions is the nondurability of subsistence goods. Most foraging societies tend to lack the technological means to preserve naturally occurring wealth. Most foodstuffs will spoil. Even those that do not spoil are difficult to transport over the great distances that foragers must travel. Nor, usually, can they be stored in any stationary locale in such a way as to be inaccessible to needy insects, beasts, or people. With small reserves and no concrete insurance against shortfalls, one is best served by cultivating a reputation for generosity.

So it is too on skid row, although here the analogue lies in the nature of business practices. One "buys" one's subsistence with sporadic income at prices more or less geared to a full day's earnings. Surplus is an oddity. Even if it does appear, it is almost impossible to protect it from robbery. Banking, of course, might be used. But each time one brings a portion of one's savings into the community, fellow residents in need are encountered. In such an event, there are only two options. One may refuse requests for aid and be beaten and ostracized. Or one may share in the remote hope of accumulating social credits for use at a time when the roles will be reversed.

Drunken Binges Are Shrewd Investments

Always, in a society that loathes debt, the management of windfalls is a delicate business. In his well-known research on the Ju/'hoansi, Richard Lee illustrated what turns out to be a typical solution in egalitarian societies. Successful hunters always tend to trivialize the value of a major kill. Colleagues will usually concur with the judgement and will participate only begrudgingly in the tasks of retrieving a carcass and rendering it to portions.

Analogous problems on skid row were resolved in a similar way—through binges. Upon acquiring any large amount of money, perhaps as an income-tax refund, the skid row resident found himself in the odious position of having to do something with it. Skid row offered few alternatives in such an instance: One could attempt to conceal it, only to end up beaten and robbed, or one could share—generously. These being the only choices, sharing, especially in the form of a quick and thorough binge, were clearly the wiser.

The ecology of skid row imposes certain minor stylistic differences on the solution. Whereas, for example, one might anticipate binging to be evident in a broad distribution of funds consumed at once in the form of needed commodities, the practice typically

And so it was for most people. Sudden, finite wealth invariably ordained madness, while opportunities for permanent income were more likely to result in health, as the fundamental ingredients of a working-class worldview.

Conclusions

This observation may have interesting implications for applied research and social programming. We can appreciate, for example, why counselling has usually failed whenever it was designed to restructure the patterns of spending of skid row residents. Many of the behaviours that this counselling attempted to elicit were maladaptive on skid row.

Contrary to such psychological explanations as the "culture of poverty" model, the causes of poverty on skid row are almost always material and ordinary. Many of them earned more than welfare recipients who were permanent residents of area hotels and rooming houses. Why, then, were they homeless? The simple answer is that those who relied on work paid by the day were forced to rent shelter by the day, at rates so high that periodic homelessness was inevitable.

This explains why life-threatening poverty in this setting cannot be eliminated until social programs target the basic material conditions of the local economy. This may not mean costly job-creation initiatives or across-the-board increases in income security benefits. Rather, the more effective strategies are likely to be small and local: some regulation of the local labour and housing businesses, together with flexible provisions for income security. A better understanding of the problems of skid row residents and the provision of more effective help will require much commitment, but also a sustained attention to the ecology of seemingly deviant patterns of behaviour.

References

Hauch, Christopher. 1985. *Coping Strategies and Street Life: The Ethnography of Winnipeg's Skid Row.* Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies.

Lee, Richard. 1979. *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Liebow, Elliot. 1967. *Tally's Corner.* Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Orwell, George. 1940. *Down and Out in Paris and London.* New York: Penguin.

Spradley, James. 1970. *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads.* Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Wiseman, Jacqueline P. 1970. *Stations of the Lost: The Treatment of Skid Row Alcoholics.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Source: From Christopher Hauch (Senior Clinical Consultant, Mental Health Division of Manitoba Health), original essay, 1992. Reprinted with permission. (The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the policy of Manitoba Health.)

receiving from others in time of need. A levelling mechanism is at work in the process of generalized or balanced reciprocity, promoting an egalitarian distribution of wealth over the long run.

Negative reciprocity is a third form of reciprocity exchange, in which the giver tries to get the better end of the deal. The parties involved have opposing interests, usually are members of different communities, and are not closely related. The ultimate form of negative reciprocity is to take something by force. Less extreme forms involve guile and deception or, at the least, hard bargaining. In North America, an example would be the stereotype of the car salesperson who claims a car was "driven by a little old lady to church" when in fact it was not and is likely to develop problems soon after it leaves the sales lot. Among the Navajo, according to anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, "to deceive when trading with foreign peoples is morally accepted."[21]

[21] Kluckhohn, C. (1972). Quoted in Sahlins, M. (1972). *Stone Age Economics* (p. 200). Chicago: Aldine.

Negative reciprocity. A form of exchange whereby the giver tries to get the better of the exchange.