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## Framing Samuel See: the discursive detritus of the moral panic over the “double epidemic” of methamphetamines and HIV among gay men

Theodore K. Gideonse\*

Program in Global Health, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, United States

### Abstract

After being arrested for violating a restraining order against his husband, on November 24, 2013, Yale professor Samuel See died while in lockup at the Union Avenue Detention Center in New Haven, Connecticut. The death received media attention around the world, with readers arguing online about whether See’s death was caused by police misconduct, as his friends and colleagues charged in interviews and during a well-publicised march and protest. When an autopsy revealed that he had died from a methamphetamine-induced heart attack, online commentary changed dramatically, with See’s many supporters rhetorically abandoning him and others describing him as a stereotype of the gay meth addict who deserved his fate. In this article, I argue that this shift in the interpretation and meaning of See’s death can be traced to the discursive structures left by the moral panic about crystal meth in the United States (1996–2008), which comprised within it a secondary moral panic about crystal meth in the gay community and its connection to the spread of HIV and a possible super-strain (2005–2008).

### Keywords

Moral panics; Methamphetamine; Gay men; HIV/AIDS; Media framing

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About 40 protestors marched in the middle of downtown streets and to police headquarters Tuesday afternoon to demand answers and accountability for the death of Yale professor Samuel See while in lockup at the Union Avenue Detention Center. The multi-faceted protest brought together friends, family members and other supporters of See to remember his legacy and to demand answers about his death while in the custody of state judicial marshals.

### ***New Haven Register*, December 10, 2013 (Scinto, 2013)**

The ten people who spoke or read at the service [on January 25, 2014] did not try to bring up the painful circumstances of [Samuel] See’s death at age 34 last fall, in a holding cell at New Haven police headquarters. Nor did they speak about the apparent troubles in his life, which

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\*Corresponding author at: 10833 LeConte Ave., MC: 739516, CHS 12-105, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA. Tel.: +1 44 012137183568. gideonse@ucla.edu.

may have included drug use. Instead, they remembered the man they knew as engaged, kind, passionate, and committed, whether as a friend, a teacher, or a scholar.

### ***Yale Alumni News, March/April, 2014 (Branch, 2014)***

What happened between early December and late January that caused people who had been in the street chanting about the cause of Samuel See's death to then refrain from even mentioning the cause at his memorial service? On January 6, 2014, the Connecticut medical examiner announced that See died of "acute methamphetamine and amphetamine intoxication with recent myocardial infarct" (Kaminer, 2014), not the result of police brutality or misconduct, as See's friends and colleagues had claimed. Suddenly, the circumstances of See's death were unmentionable, seemingly shameful, and no longer a political cause. This shift in the interpretation and meaning of See's death was not an accident, like See's death probably was. It likely can be traced to the discursive structures and media frames that were left by the moral panic about crystal meth in the United States (1996–2008), which comprised within it a secondary moral panic about crystal meth in the gay community and its connection to the spread of HIV and a possible super-strain (2005–2008). Moral panics, as Cohen (2011) and Goode and Ben-Yahuda (1994a) argue, are disproportionate, extreme social reactions to threats that create "'folk devils' ... deviant stereotypes identifying the enemy... selfish, evil wrongdoers who are responsible for the trouble" (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994a, p. 156).

In this article, I analyse the discursive structures of the moral panic of the "double epidemic" of HIV and meth, often called the "world's most dangerous drug" (Biega, 2006), in order to explain the response to Samuel See's death. After a discussion of moral panic theory, I provide a history of the meth epidemic, including a history of the association of meth and HIV and the secondary moral panic this connection wrought. I then provide an analysis of the reader reaction to the See's death, arguing that framing Samuel See's death as the result of his deviance led to his rhetorical abandonment, transforming him from a victim of an unjust system to meth-head destined for doom. Finally, I discuss how this case study can help us understand the ways that discourse creates a subject, in particular the deviant tweaker.

### **Moral panics, representation, and meaning**

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a) provide a clear schematic for what constitutes a moral panic. First, there must be greater and increasing concern that the behaviours of a certain group of people will lead to problems for the larger, general society. This can be seen in opinion polls, media attention, and social action. Next, hostility develops; the group of concern becomes a folk devil, a "them" counter to an "us". Consensus occurs in the next step. This is not by any means the majority agreeing, but rather a sizeable group in a particular place, for moral panic does not need to be nationwide but can occur in a small, discrete community. The fourth attribute of a moral panic is disproportionality, in which the reaction to the phenomenon is statistically exaggerated (such as the claim that anorexia kills 150,000 American women a year), nonexistent (such as the fear of satanic ritual abuse), or comparatively more focused upon than the same problem at a different time (such as heroin

in the 1990s, when rates of use were the same as in the 1980s). This paradigm has been criticised for “inconsistency in criticising problems as socially constructed while also relying on positivist pronouncements about the ‘real’ scale of those problems” (Fraser, Moore, & Keane, 2014, p. 64). But positivistic and social constructivist analyses are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to declare, based on an examination of the evidence, that a problem exists, and then it is possible to examine how the reactions and conceptualisations of the problem are socially, culturally, and historically situated.

These panics are volatile, arising and disappearing just as quickly, though many elements of the panic can become institutionalised. This can be seen in the aftermath of some moral panics, such as those about paedophilia and childhood sexual abuse, which led to sex offender registries that are now embedded in the American legal system. Similarly, the panic about HIV and meth has led to numerous institutional and cultural changes, from federal funded interventions and research projects to the omnipresent admonitions of meth use during sex—“No PNP” or “No party-and-play”—that appear on gay dating profiles. The reaction to the death of See, coming eight years after the peak of the moral panic about meth in the gay community, is structured by the cultural ideologies created during that panic.

The media play particularly powerful roles in this amplification of deviance by helping “[identify and reify] internal enemies and external enemies” (Denham, 2010, p. 485). “Moral entrepreneurs” in the forms of politicians, pundits, editors, and producers bind deviant behaviours with “shame, disrespect, and irresponsibility” (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, p. 84), which, in turn, encourages audiences to have particular emotional responses, usually anger or “moral indignation”. The depictions of these moral panics—of the folk devils and their deviant behaviours—help audiences form cognitive frames through which to view events and attribute blame. But emotions become frames in and of themselves; repeatedly viewing pairings of emotions like fear and anger with certain narratives and images shapes the way that people read and react to those narratives and images (Nabi, 2003), which explains how the media’s moral panic about meth and HIV helped structure the response to Samuel See’s death.

### **Meth, HIV, and the super strain: “a wake-up call”**

Methamphetamine is an addictive stimulant that provides a euphoric rush to its users who call it meth, crystal, and tina, among other names. As its use spread from the West Coast and into both eastern gay enclaves and the rural Midwest in the late 1990s and early 2000s, use of drug became known as an “epidemic” and the drug’s nervous and jittery addicts became known derisively as “tweakers”. Communities affected and infected by meth were astonished by the level of crime, the number of addicts, and physical and social suffering associated with the drug and its abusers. Meth was testing many rural and many gay communities in the same ways that crack had in some inner city neighbourhoods in the 1980s. Cohen contends that while some moral panics are based on nearly non-existent problems, such as the hysteria about satanic child murders in the late 1980s, others were based on tangible, even catastrophic problems, like the crack and AIDS epidemics in the mid to late 1980s. Meth is one such problem. However, the proportionality and quality of the response is the issue, because “some disparities are so gross, some claims so exaggerated,

some political agendas so tendentious that they can only be called something like, well, ‘social injustice’” (Cohen, 2011, p. xliii).

The panic about meth did not result in anything as extreme as the law that treated crack as 100 worse than a similar weight in powder cocaine and was used wildly disproportionately against African-Americans (Protass, 2007). While meth users did not experience that level of a legislative attack, the discursive construction of the meth addict was not dissimilar to that of the crack addict. Skinny, crazed urban blacks were simply replaced by prematurely aged, toothless, pockmarked rural whites. This can be seen in newspaper, television news, and documentary reports, and it is even more pronounced in the anti-meth public health campaigns in which the arguments against meth use are the most concentrated. “[By] 2005”, Reding writes, “thousands of stories across the country [blamed] meth for delusional violence, moral depravity, extreme sexual perversion, and an almost otherworldly, hallucinogenic dimension of evil” (Reding, 2009, p. 43).

The descriptions of meth use in the press focused greatly on the worst case scenarios, from the horrible burns caused by meth lab accidents to abandoned children of meth addicts. The public health campaigns focused on the so-called meth mouth, in which meth addicts lose their teeth because of incessant grinding, or on family violence, like the ad from the Montana Meth Project that depicted a bloodied woman on the floor of a kitchen with the slogan, “My mom knows I’d never hurt her. Then she got in the way” (Mother, 2011). Gay meth-users were referred to as careless as they partied in denial, spreading addiction and HIV. Their behaviour was called “sexual roulette” (Cheshes, 1999), and it was leading to a “rebound epidemic” (Torassa, 2001). The pathologically narcissistic pleasure-seekers that provided the petri dish for AIDS in the 1970s, depicted not just in the speeches of anti-gay politicians like Senator Jesse Helms but also in histories like *And the Band Played On*, were back, this time as the folk devil of the meth–HIV moral panic.

While a few academic researchers had written about gay use of meth in the 1990s (Reback, 1997), the extremely influential article Halkitis et al. published in 2001 “A double epidemic: crystal methamphetamine drug use in relation to HIV transmission among gay men”—cited 324 times in other peer-reviewed articles as of October 2015, according to Google Scholar—cemented meth and HIV as intertwined problems, describing a looming spectre of an increase of HIV in the gay community due to meth use (Halkitis, Parsons, & Stirratt, 2001). Halkitis et al. use emotionally laden terminology and focus on stigmatised kinky sexual behaviour, all of which is meant to unnerve readers. Meth is a “substantial threat to HIV/AIDS prevention”, and the combination of meth and sex is “disconcerting” because meth encourages “risky” behaviour. All of this means that there is a “potential for an epidemic of methamphetamine”, which would be “destructive” (2001, pp. 18–19). They point to the use of the drug in the creation of “instant bottom” and in facilitating sexual marathons, group sex, fisting, and “a greater likelihood of having 50 or more sexual partners ... as compared to their heterosexual counterparts” (2001, p. 25). The language of Halkitis et al. was more clinical and technical than contemporary popular press accounts, but the goal was the same; while it is doubtful they were attempting to titillate readers, they were certainly trying to alarm them.

Halkitis et al. conclude that meth is at the centre of behaviours that will exacerbate and “perpetuate” the AIDS epidemic (2001, p. 28). However, while this conclusion is similar to many of the articles they cite, Halkitis et al. go further to speculate on an even worse outcome of this double epidemic, that increased unprotected sex among HIV-positive men on HAART will result in drug-resistant strains of the virus. While at this point the science of how HAART was affecting the mutations of the virus was not clear, the suggestion that too much sex by people on HAART would lead to a super-strain and to another, even greater public health emergency was founded only in theory. But that did not stop this possibility from being repeated by gay pundits and AIDS activists (Ehrenstein, 2004).

As meth use increased in the few years after “A double epidemic”, so did community concern. In New York in 2003, for example, the Crystal Meth Working Group began hosting crowded town hall meetings focusing on the scourge of meth and how government and HIV service organisations were not doing enough to stop it. Former users described how their drug use led to their HIV infection, warning others. The Crystal Meth Working Group and well-known ACT-UP activist Peter Staley put up anti-meth posters around New York meant to scare and shame users and potential users. The Crystal Meth Working Group and other similar organisations, Race explains, “formed international networks that are generally critical of harm-reduction approaches and enthusiastically endorse the hard-line stance of conservative voices in government” (2009, pp. 170–172). These efforts got the attention of public health agencies around the country.

But there was pushback. Researchers in Australia were reporting that meth use did not predict HIV infection among gay men (Race, 2009, pp. 174, 222), and Halkitis’s group wrote in one study that they had found no difference in HIV risk behaviours during sex whether the user was high on meth, drunk, or sober (Halkitis, Shrem, & Martin, 2005). Instead, they theorise, those men who use meth are already prone to risky behaviours, sexual and otherwise. In addition, Halkitis criticised the efforts for the Crystal Meth Working Group’s focus on linking HIV to meth. “People would have you believe that because of these public education campaigns there is less meth use”, he told a journalist. “I believe that they’ve raised awareness and promoted dialogue about meth use. Potentially, that discussion has caused people to think twice before they use. But I don’t know if those ads are necessarily effective that they’re putting up all over the place. I think the message is wrong linking HIV to meth because you’re losing sight of the big picture” (Owen, 2007, p. 179). In more colourful language in the national gay magazine *Genre*, a club kid named Diablogue wrote, “It combines the worst aspects of over-the-top anti-drug hysteria with the best of ‘get press at any cost’ ‘80s-era AIDS activism. The ads don’t work on drug-taking hedonists, they work on riling up the news media, public health and law enforcement officials” (2007, p. 178).

When news of the feared super-strain HIV arrived in 2005 these dissenting voices were drowned out. The hysteria of AIDS reports from the 1980s returned, and combining the increasingly moralistic and angry tone of the anti-meth public health campaigns with the copious amount of academic research showing that meth use was increasing and implicated in new HIV infections, the media in the spring of 2005 helped create a smaller moral panic with the larger one already ongoing. A man who was recently infected with HIV developed

full-blown AIDS in mere months, and he was resistant to three out of four classes of anti-retroviral drugs. On February 11, 2005, health officials in New York City put out a press release announcing that situation, with the city's health commissioner quoted saying, "This is a wakeup call to men who have sex with men". Major AIDS researchers were quoted in the release to give it weight. The writer of CNN's article wrote that the situation "raises the possibility that a hard-to-treat variant of the virus could be spreading among gay and bisexual men who use the drug methamphetamine" (CNN, 2005). Other initial news reports repeated the "wake up call" quote and dwelled on the patient having been infected during unprotected anal intercourse and while using crystal meth (Dobnik, 2005; Rovner, 2005; Santora, Altman, & McNeil, 2005; Talaga & Star, 2005).

In the string of newspaper, magazine, and web articles and TV news stories that followed, the restraint of the initial wire news stories disappeared. The always incendiary *New York Post* had a headline that read "New AIDS Super Bug–Nightmare Strain Shows Up In City" and its lead sentence was even more frantic: "A frightening, never-before-seen 'superstrain' of the AIDS virus - unimaginably aggressive and resistant to nearly all treatments - has been found in New York City, alarmed health officials announced yesterday" (Edozien, 2005). *The New York Times* headline was finger-wagging and accusatory: "Among Gays Grown Complacent And Often Careless, Fear Returns" (Confessore, 2005). Halkitis is quoted in the article saying that his prediction had come true: "This is what we were fearing all along". Only Walter Armstrong, the editor of the *Poz*, doubted that the hysteria was warranted, saying, "A handful of cases does not an epidemic make". But this kind of doubt is described as "indifferent" in a handwringing, accusatory article for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, "No panic over report of new HIV strain; Infection back East worries some here, others indifferent". Each person quoted is clearly concerned, but only one 28-year-old gay man doing his laundry says he would wait to see whether panic was warranted; he must have been the "indifferent" one (Fulbright, 2005). In a third *New York Times* article, the lead quote is similarly used to highlight the stupidity and indifference of so many gay men: "I have spoken to young kids, sometimes here, who say, 'If I get it, it's no big deal. I can just take a pill'", he said. "I'm like, 'Are you stupid?' It is so disgusting. I find it really disturbing" (Perez-Pena & Santora, 2005). *The Times'* fourth front page article on the super strain in as many days was titled "Gays Debate Radical Steps to Curb Unsafe Sex" (Jacobs, 2005b). But more than discussing the details of how such an epidemiological project would work, the article is mostly a collection of statements from influential gay pundits like Charles Kaiser, Gabriel Rotello, and Larry Kramer about the irresponsible, even criminal, behaviour of gay men who use meth and spread HIV. In the days and weeks that followed, newspapers and televisions newscasts all over the country (and Canada and the United Kingdom) repeated the messages and tropes that appeared in the *New York Times* (Allen, 2005; Carry, 2005; Chung, 2005; Honigsbaum, 2005; Jacobs, 2005a; Kusel, 2005; Moore, 2005; Ramsey, 2005; Resnick, 2005; Shapiro, Neel, & Domowitz, 2005; Specter, 2005; Turner, 2005). *The New York Daily News* railed, "Such reckless foolishness is the most extreme manifestation of a complacency toward AIDS" (Deadly Disease Deadly Behavior, 2005). The influential sex columnist Dan Savage spoke out in favour of tracking down HIV-positive gay men having unsafe sex in an interview on National Public Radio (Conan, 2005), while the *Village Voice* gossip columnist found such ideas "alarmist" (Musto, 2005). And

“alarmist” is perhaps the best way to describe the opening of a *Newsweek* article than ran at the end of February; the lead was a detailed description of meth-fuelled orgy in a hotel room across from Ground Zero (D. J. Jefferson & Williams, 2005).

As the spring and summer of 2005 wore on, articles like *Newsweek*'s appeared in newspapers in Canada, Australia, Britain, and in smaller American cities. But none reported what the *Daily News* reporter Jason Shin (2005) did: that the man who had been infected with the “super strain” was responding to treatment. But Shin did not report on the July presentation by Gary Blick at an international AIDS conference that explained the epidemiology of the man's strain, that it was contracted from a man from Connecticut whose virus had become resistant to anti-retroviral drugs after many years of taking them. While meth had been a key factor in the condomless sex that led to the infection of the New Yorker, the resistant—but hardly invulnerable—strain had not spread further than the New Yorker, the Connecticut man, and the Connecticut man's partner; epidemiologists now contended that there was no new epidemic. In the paper on the case that was finally published in 2007, Blick wrote that while it was possible mutations and resistance to drugs could lead to a “disastrous” super strain or to “superinfection”, in which someone infected with one strain of HIV can be also infected with a separate a distinct strain, the 2005 case was an only an interesting aberration, if a worrisome one (Blick et al., 2007). A recent meta-analysis of HIV superinfection studies shows that there is very little evidence that superinfection happens more than extremely rarely (Waters & Smit, 2012).

By the time researchers determined that the super strain was unlikely to become a new epidemic, the panic had nearly run its course. The media response was not surprising: as in the first AIDS panic in the early 1980s (Patton, 1985), the discourse focused on the irresponsibility of gay men, on out of control sexual behaviour, on the danger that what gay men have wrought will lead to a second epidemic, and implicitly, this would be yet another epidemic that threatens the “general” and “innocent” population. When researchers reported that the drug-resistant HIV was not immediately a public health danger, virtually nothing was mentioned by the media outlets that had promoted the threat, but the demonisation of gay men as lawless and hedonistic remained. While traditional moral panic theories and analyses (Denham, 2010; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994b; Morgan, Wallack, & Buchanan, 1989) focus on how people who seek or are already in elected and appointed places of power benefit the most from these sorts of panics and crises—because they activate attribution biases that focus on individual moral failure rather than of socioeconomic problems that should be the bailiwick of those in power— the panics also, and perhaps most insidiously, benefit those conservative communities and classes that feel threatened by the Other in the form of the folk devil. Online communities have achieved an out-sized influence on political rhetoric in the United States in recent years, particularly on the right (Carty, 2011; Raisinghani & Weiss, 2011; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011), and readers and users of conservative web forums like *Free Republic* and *Townhall* posted many of the mainstream media's panicky articles as fodder for their readers' commentary, usually as confirmation of their beliefs that gay men were dangerous to American society (Colson, 2005; Party, Play and Pay: Inside New York's Meth Fueled HIV/Internet Sex Parties, 2005).

One of the ways that meth/HIV panic was different from the original AIDS panic was that in many cases it was gay men who helped to fan the panic's flames by demonising the meth users in their community. Gay men had made enormous progress in the 25 years since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, but in 2005, these rights and gains were threatened by ballot initiatives and an emboldened conservative movement in Washington DC; gay meth users threatened the hard-fought image of gay men as respected and responsible members of society. As Denham writes, "In the context of moral panics, when groups that have attained power sense external threats, they may characterize specific out-group behaviors as deviant and morally reprehensible; mass media facilitate these characterizations through narratives of heroes and villains" (2010, p. 488). One of the commenters on [FreeRepublic.com](http://FreeRepublic.com) astutely wrote, "This story is the homosexual civil union proponents' worst nightmare". Discussions of how to reach out to and help meth users who were having unsafe sex were present in the reporting, but the dominant, both emotively and in placement in the actual stories, message was that meth users practicing unsafe sex were stupid, childless, criminal, suicidal, dangerous, and insane. By helping to build a discursive prison cell for these men, the gay authors of these discourses were able to define themselves as being outside that prison, free from drugs and disease and deserving of their place in mainstream American society.

The hostility in the media towards meth users who practiced bareback sex easily transferred into the quotidian language and behaviours of many gay men. Prior to the super strain panic the phrase "No PNP"—no party 'n' play, or no sex while on meth—had started appearing profiles on online gay dating websites like Manhunt and Adam4Adam along with previously common slang like DDF UB2 (drug and disease free, you should be, too) and NSA (no strings attached). But the panic energised the stigmatisation of meth-using gay men; "No PNP" could be found everywhere, including the increasingly popular mobile phone apps like Grindr and Scruff. It is hard to know what the motivation is for each appearance of "No PNP", whether it was a way to avoid the folk devils of the panic or to avoid the temptation to become one, but whatever the immediate reason was, the pervasiveness of the exclusionary language pushed men who wanted to use meth and have condomless sex into their virtual venues like the still popular [BBRTS.com](http://BBRTS.com) (Bareback Real Time Sex) that would cater to them without stigma.

As the panic subsided, the stigma hardened. The general public and most gay men stopped paying attention; the anti-meth ads and messages became rote, omnipresent, like wall paper. The mediated discussions, pop culture depictions, and public health campaigns solidified the ideology of the out-of-control tweaker, but few of them caused much commotion or commentary. A *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* episode that expressed moral ambivalence about the murder of gay meth addicts spreading a super strain of HIV made barely a ripple. The largest anti-meth campaign in the country, California's \$17.5 million "Me Not Meth" campaign, barely registered in the mainstream media and the gay media was only slightly concerned. While the panic died down, the ideology that fed the panic remained, as did the folk devil the panic created, an object of scorn or of fear. In the framing of his death, Samuel See became that object.



## Framing Samuel See

As many of the journalists who wrote about Samuel See noted, his death on November 24, 2013, was mysterious, even weird. This could be blamed for much of the initial confusion after his death was announced by the New Haven police and the news made its way to the papers and the blogs. First, he was arrested in his own home for violating a restraining order against his husband, who was also arrested. Second, his response to the arrest was not just anger, and then resistance and a scuffle, which led to a small cut above his eye, but also, according to police, See yelled, “I will kill you! I will destroy you!” at the police. Third, he died alone in his cell around 5:30 am for no apparent reason; after a few stitches for the cut, the doctors at Yale-New Haven Hospital deemed him healthy enough to be booked and locked up. Fourth, the police did not send out a press release about See’s death for three days and only after family members told reporters who then made inquiries. Fifth, a few days after the news of See’s death broke, news broke that See’s face was on several escort advertisements that also listed his home phone number.

The oddness of the See’s death, combined with the fame of Yale, See’s homosexuality, his supposed sex work, and his recent same-sex marriage made the story salacious, controversial, and thus worth reporting for newspapers particularly in Connecticut and nearby New York City, as well as nationally and worldwide. This also made it attractive to readers, who commented extensively on web versions of newspaper articles and on blog posts on well-trafficked sites like the *Huffington Post*, *Gawker*, and *Gothamist*. The initial reaction to the death focused mostly on the possibility that See died because of police misconduct, and while this continued after the revelation of the escort websites, See’s deviance, as a seeming idol of respectable gayness who was secretly a stereotypically debauched homosexual, slowly turned the crowd against See. By the time that the autopsy revealed in early January that he had died of a heart attack brought on by extensive methamphetamine use, See’s vocal supporters were silent on the web.

After collecting 121 news articles and blog posts about See’s death, from the announcement of his death by the police to a memorial service for him four months later, I used Atlas.ti to do a content analysis of the articles and the readers’ comments. The most active commenting occurred in the early stories run by *The Yale Daily News*, *The New Haven Register*, *Gawker*, *Gothamist*, and *The Huffington Post*. For example, *The Huffington Post* article “Yale Professor Samuel See Found Dead In Jail Cell” had 839 comments (Kingkade, 2013), and the *Gawker* post “Yale Professor Found Dead in His New Haven Jail Cell” had 230 comments (Donohue, 2013). New Haven locals and Yale affiliates kept commenting on their local news sites well into January, with the *Yale Daily News* article “See’s death meth-induced” garnering 70 comments (Stanley-Becker & Ramilo, 2014). I coded the articles and comments, focusing on how both the media and the media’s consumers interpreted See’s death: what was the cause of See’s death, who was to blame, and what kind of narrative was constructed.

On the first day the story broke, the writers of the articles, from traditional news-gathering organisations and on the new media blogs that typically repost articles with commentary, reported the events with little analysis. With such little explanation and so few details,

commenters were free to guess as to how and why See died. The scuffle with the arresting officers was reported, and because of that, many assumed police were to blame. One *Gawker* commenter wrote, “It’s actually not that much of a stretch to suggest the cops might’ve worked this guy over a little bit for mouthing off”, while another wrote, “And the police wonder why the citizenry have no faith in them” (Donohue, 2013). Some assumed that even if See may have done something to provoke them, the cops must be responsible. On the gay news site *Queerty*, one commenter echoed many others, writing, “I’m sorry but if you are stupid enough to talk back to or threaten a cop then you are asking for a world of hurt” (Gremore, 2013). Some commenters defended the police and chided those who concluded that See was the victim of police brutality, predicting (correctly) that See died from something else, likely drugs. *Gawker* commenters whose opinions placed them firmly in the minority wrote, “It’s terrible what happened, but I highly doubt the local police would kill a Yalie; this has all the signs of drug abuse and mental illness” (Donohue, 2013). Another simply wrote, “Tina”, referring to one of the street names for crystal methamphetamine. In these first days, they had few supporters, even on sites that cater to conservative readers more likely to sympathise with the police, like *The New York Post* or *Free Republic*. The quick conclusion that See was a victim of violent police officers is becoming typical in American media discourses, as can be seen in the reactions to the several high-profile deaths at the hands of police officers in the United States, particularly Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

When news that See’s photograph was posted on escort sites and his positive HIV status broke, defenders of the police (and the status quo) latched on to this deviance as evidence that See must have been doing something wrong that would have led to either a confrontation with police or death from either drugs or AIDS. On the gay forum *DataLounge*, one participant connected the unconnected dots, seeing his sexual behaviour as directly responsible for his marital strife and his death, writing, “His escort ad proved exactly what I suspected: He was addicted to drugs and likely POZ”. Another *DataLounge* commenter was explicit about See’s death being a good thing, writing, “Darwin Award. Good riddance before he infected or damaged anyone else” (Thread, 2013). This sentiment, that See was a Typhoid Mary, was mirrored in a comment on a conservative blog, *The Free Patriot*, on which a commenter wrote, “[He] was a walking dead man anyways with all the STD’s [sic] in his system” (Mystery Deepens, 2013). A *Gawker* commenter simply wrote “Poor choices” (Bluestone, 2013), echoing the Drug War’s discursive construction of drug use as a social problem that can be controlled through rational behaviours.

Two weeks after See’s death was announced, See’s students and colleagues held a protest march, at which they gave impassioned but often heady speeches about both See’s great promise as an academic and the American police state’s crimes. The latter included such statements as the protest organiser Nathan Brown’s: “A death in jail is a political death. This is especially the case when it is the death of a gay man, given the structural and historical homophobia of policing, incarceration and the legal system in the United States”. See’s sister, Kelly Flanagan, who had called the police when See’s husband had refused to leave the house, said, “I called the police for help for my brother that day, and he’s dead. I do not want this to ever happen to another person again.” See’s supporters mostly ignored the stories about the escort sites as well as the gossip that was spread in comments section of

some sites. Flanagan, however, said she knew that her brother “wasn’t a saint” but did not believe that he had set up the escort sites (Stanley-Becker, 2013).

The comments sections of the news sites that wrote about the protests—mainly the newspapers in New Haven—featured spirited arguments over the protesters’ messages, their language, and their facts. The divisions fell mostly along ideological and socioeconomic lines, with conservative readers attacking the elitist, cop-hating, debauched Yalies and liberals decrying the police and their judgmental, homophobic supporters. A number of commenters specifically attacked Brown and his politics, with one writing, “Brown is just a typical rabble rouser trying to get his 15 minutes of fame. A political death? Get real and get a life!” (Shelton, 2013). The protesters’ expansive argument about the inherent evil of policing also riled people. While criticism of the protest was strong, several defenders of the protest were vociferous. In response to one commenter, who stated he was a police officer, a protest supporter wrote, “officer trust me, it’s appropriate for these protesters to be upset with the police. someone in their community died in lockup, and the police have actively prevented details of the event to come to light” (Bass, 2013). In the online commentary, See’s death, like so many issues argued about by Americans on the Internet, became framed as left versus right debate. The left believed See to have died because he was treated poorly by the police most likely because he was gay, while the right supported the police, decried their critics, and believed See’s actions, brought on by the drugs and disease of his gay lifestyle, led to his death.

A month later, Connecticut’s Chief Medical Examiner released See’s autopsy and declared that he died of “acute methamphetamine and amphetamine intoxication with recent myocardial infarction”. Aside from comments from a fellow faculty member and a former student stating that they knew nothing of See’s drug use, most of his supporters were silent, in the press and in the comments sections of the numerous articles about the autopsy. This was not unnoticed by those who did choose to comment, with some posting “I told you so” and others expressing outrage at the protesters and the treatment of the New Haven police. One commenter on the *New Haven Independent’s* article asked, “Where [are] all the people who were blaming the police for Mr. See’s death now?” (Bass, 2014). The comments on the *New Haven Register’s* article were full of attacks on the protesters, expressing both class rage and homophobia. A few commenters said that the protesters had a right to their protest, but the defence of the protesters’ positions was tepid and the defence of See disappeared. At best, he became a tragic and pitiable figure to their commenters, at worst he was deserving of a fate he chose for himself. The commenters described See as either the folk devil created during the moral panic about the super strain and murdered by a public health vigilante on *Law & Order: SVU* or one the gaunt, lost addicts depicted in the Me, Not Meth campaign, or some combination of the two. As one *Gawker* commenter wrote, “Very sad, but not terribly unexpected” (C. Jefferson, 2014). The likely gay commenters on the gay-oriented sites were as hostile as those on the mainstream and conservative sites. On *DataLounge*, a few of the commenters were merciless in their complaints about See embarrassing them, just as HIV-positive meth addicts had embarrassed the gay community during the mini moral panic in 2005. One exasperated reader wrote, “This whole story is SO EMBARRASSING. What a bunch of losers. Good riddance to the professor, no great loss at all. if only the pathetic webcam whore husband overdosed too” (Thread, 2013). The anger expressed by some in the

comments sections a month before when people suggested that See's "lifestyle", and not police misconduct, may have had more to do with his death was gone after the toxicology report was released. His supporters disappeared from the comments sections and from the news articles, save a follow-up article two months later in which See's sister discussed the possibility of suing the hospital that did not notice See's heart condition.

Meth in and of itself would probably not have had the same effect on the discussion and subsequent reassessment of See's death. It was the interaction of the discourses and stigmas of HIV, non-normative sexual behaviour, and meth use that combined to become more than the sum of the parts. After three decades of the AIDS epidemic, the panic and fear of a person with HIV had dissipated and been replaced by pity and concern. The stigma around sex work is strong, but not in many progressive communities, like Yale's, where sex workers' rights have become a cause. The revelation of meth as the cause of See's death brought the pervasive discourse of the drug's ugly irrationality to the combination; the HIV begins to seem uncontrollable, the sex work seems more desperate, and the man is now pathetic and scary.

How See died, the revelations about his mental health and sexual behaviour, and the protest seems to have been ignored at a memorial service for See at Yale a few months later. As the Yale alumni magazine reported, none of the speakers mentioned "the painful circumstances of See's death" (Branch, 2014). The speeches memorialised him as a professor, academic, and friend, at all of which he apparently excelled. He was also a methamphetamine user and probably an addict and a sexual adventurer. While those who didn't know See abandoned him rhetorically in the comments threads because of his meth use, his friends and colleagues tried to create a memory of him that excised his drug use and a part of his sexuality from his person, as those things were too shameful to contemplate and remember.

## Conclusion and implications

See's good looks, marriage, position, and apparent homonormativity seemed to make him worthy of adulation, worthy of being one of the good gays that could appear in advertisements in support of gay marriage and equality. But his tawdry death and the revelations that he and his partner were not Ozzie and Harry, that See himself was both HIV-positive and addicted to the drug that both embarrassed and hurt the gay community, labelled him a folk devil, an enemy, and an object of shame. While this construction of See is specific to the meth and HIV-meth moral panics, addicts of all walks of life have been demonised in both life and death probably since humans developed morality. The last century's drug-based moral panics all created folk devils: cannabis in the 1930s and Mexicans, cannabis in the 1960s and hippies, heroin in the 1950s and beatniks, crack in the 1980s and black crackheads, meth in 1990s and 2000s and tweakers, both gay and redneck. See's case is particularly interesting because of the breadth of the response to his death and the telling transformation of that response as HIV and meth became involved. While See died before he was transformed into a rhetorical monster, most people who are turned into folk devils by moral panics and their detritus are forced to live as folk devils, as deviants. Thus, the analysis of the historical origins and discursive construction of the deviant folk

devils can help us understand– and perhaps learn to dismantle–the structure that girds the lived experience of deviant.

The media’s representation of moral panics and the folk devils at their centres not only influence the responses, but create and implicate the subjects of panics and define their role–their subject position–within a culture. While much of western philosophy has privileged the agentive subject who believes that he or she is the source of meaning and source of discourse, Michel Foucault’s (1976) radical position was that the subject does not exist outside of discourse because it must always be subjected to discourse. Discourse produces subjects, not the other way around. Subjects have free will, but their options to exercise that will are limited by the constraints of the reality that exists within the web of power, within a specific historical context and framework. Discourse produces subjects such as, in Foucault’s work, the madman, the prisoner, and the homosexual, and now in this case, the gay tweaker. But discourse also produces, as Hall (1997, p. 56) explained, a “reader or a viewer, who is also ‘subjected to’ discourse”. These subject positions have profound effects on behaviour and subjectivity. You can become the subject *or* the abject, depending on who are determined to be in the discursive formation. For as Cohen points out, this can further solidify their status as deviants. After deviants are identified and responded to punitively, “The deviant or group of deviants is segregated or isolated and this operates to alienate them from conventional society. They perceive themselves as more deviant, group themselves with others in a similar position, and this leads to more deviance. This, in turn, exposes the group to further punitive sanctions and other forceful action by the conformists– and the system starts going round again” (2011, pp. 11–12). The discursive construction of HIV-positive gay tweakers stigmatised them, made their behaviour secretive, and in many cases made it more difficult to treat or help them (Gideonse, in preparation, 2015a, 2015b). As they were pushed out of society, into the shadows or the streets, they developed behaviours and lifestyles that only furthered and exacerbated the suffering that the moral panic taught us to fear.

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