

Key Concepts in Drugs and Society

cutting with dangerous substances, is as we have seen, both mistaken and unhelpful. Those that sell drugs do so for varying reasons: those that do so for little or no gain 'sorting' friends because they can; those that 'drift' into dealing because that is the lifestyle they have grown up into and been exposed to; those that prefer to sell to other drug users rather than commit other crimes such as burglary to feed their drug addiction, and those that see it as an opportunity to make money, among others.

Even for this latter group, however, those thought most likely to conform to the stereotype of the drug dealer, are diverse in values and approach and some researchers, such as Bourgois (1995) have chosen, rather than to define such individuals as bad, to understand their engagement with street culture, drug dealing and a host of other activities as examples of cultural resistance whereby dealing becomes one of the means acceptable to elevate themselves above the low-status, low-employment, low-life-chance context in which they have grown up.

Thus, once we understand that dealers differ we can understand that they are 'situated' by their class, gender, ethnicity, age, values and experiences in ways that show us that the drug dealer is not simply understood and therefore not a simply definable entity.

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Drug Markets: Difference and Diversity

In relation to illicit drugs the drug market is a commonly used term that is often imprecisely used. It can be used interchangeably to mean the global market in drug production, trafficking and sales that operates internationally, across any one

continent or nation or indeed in any one city or other smaller geographical location. It can also refer to the market in particular substances and/or groups of individuals. This section will focus on the drug market as it is typified within developed western nations particularly those across Europe and North America.

STEREOTYPES

Popular media imagery of the drug market in Western societies tends to suggest something that is fairly straightforward to understand, has just a few basic characteristics and is similar in form wherever it appears. Essentially, the Western drug market is considered to be something riddled with violence and violent characters, to have a strong hierarchical structure whereby a few organised crime bosses, gangs or groups (for example, Chinese Triads; Italian Mafia; Columbian cartel members) manage the distribution of drugs throughout their territories and where street dealers push their drugs with impunity and earn large sums of money doing so. As we shall see this stereotype is largely unhelpful as a way of understanding how drug markets should be understood.

DRUG MARKET ORGANISATION: STRUCTURES, VIOLENCE AND ACTIVITIES

To start with we should disabuse ourselves of the idea that there is such a thing as *the* drug market; an easily defined single entity into which all drug-related activity neatly fits. The reality is that there are numerous drug markets (many of which overlap and co-exist alongside each other) and any one drug market in any one location will differ over time depending on a whole variety of factors that affect how it is organised and how it operates. These differences will also affect the extent to which any one market conforms, or doesn't conform to the stereotypes mentioned above (Coomber, 2010).

Let us explore an example of how this difference, overlap and coexistence can work. Imagine an inner-city suburb that has numerous substances being sold. Some sellers will supply a range of substances but many only supply specific ones. Some sellers are heroin and crack cocaine suppliers while others are more 'dance drug' orientated (ecstasy, ketamine among others) while others specialise only in cannabis. Even this can differ over time. Today it is common in the West (but not everywhere) for sellers of heroin to also sell cocaine but this is a fairly recent occurrence and previously the two markets were fairly distinct. Different substances tend to be sourced in different ways: some are imported from different regions of the world where different political, economic and cultural conditions exist and this can impact on *how* the drugs are trafficked. Sourcing ecstasy tablets or cannabis from one part of Europe to another may involve large consignments and highly organised systems to manage and protect them but it commonly also involves small-scale consignments with individuals or small-scale collaborators with little by way of organisation or links to cartels or organised crime of any sort and to whom violence is not the normal way to resolve conflict or operate. Likewise once drugs are in any one nation or geographical area, depending on who sells them the drug market will differ in form and activity and different groups (for example, gangs; individuals;

small franchises, etc.) can sell even within any single drug market (for example, ecstasy). All of these things impact on how any one drug market will work and as such not all drug markets have the same levels of violence or predatory activity they are assumed to have. They also all operate – each often not ‘touching’ the other – within the same geographical areas at the same time. An example of this would be where the supply of cannabis among (and largely between) young people in the UK appears to be almost completely separate from the adult ‘drug market proper’ (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) or where in New York an adult cannabis market can operate separate to that of so-called harder drugs such as heroin (Curtis et al., 2002).

ORGANISED CRIME STRUCTURES AND MARKET CONTROL

The idea that there are ‘Mr Bigs’; ‘King Pins’ or various crime syndicates (ethnically or otherwise based) essentially controlling the drug market from the top to the bottom is not supported by the research evidence – despite regular media and law enforcement assuming this and reporting to this effect. No doubt there are individuals and groups that have significant interests and maintain significant activity within various drug markets and sometimes these activities are managed with extreme levels of actual and threatened violence. There are probably also ‘moments in time’ or pockets of opportunity when less mature markets are developed and controlled by a few big players – as seems to be the case with the heroin market of North America in the 1970s. Even this pattern, however, is far from an inevitable one as is evident by the way that the new heroin markets that emerged in the UK in the 1980s developed in a more fragmented and looser fashion.

For the sake of ease of understanding, there is a broad structure that is often depicted as a pyramid (a few ‘big-time’ actors at the top; a moderate number of mid-level operators that distribute between those at the top and those who make up the bulk at the bottom – the so-called ‘street dealers’, essentially those that sell to users) that has some use as depicting market shape. It fails to recognise, however, where small-scale individuals/groups can often be importers as well as street or lower-level sellers, or that sellers can move up and down the hierarchy over time. Thus, drug markets in Western countries in the 21st century are in fact better understood as constituted by a numerous actors/structures at the different levels of the drug market with ‘control’ over the market being a rarity rather than the norm.

‘OPEN’ AND ‘CLOSED’

The most visible of drug markets are the open or ‘street’ markets. In such contexts street sellers may be obvious to those who know what they are looking out for, or sellers may whisper to passers-by that they believe to be users or on the look out to buy illicit drugs. Occasionally, as happened in New York City in the mid-to-late 1980s, street markets become so visible and prevalent that they seem to be openly flouting the law and can severely disrupt neighbourhoods.

For the most part however, street markets tend to be consigned to specific streets or areas and are now, in the developed nations of the West at least, less numerous than they once were. Increased police concentration on street markets and the development of technologies such as cheap disposable, non-traceable mobile communications have meant that it is safer to sell drugs by controlling both communication and location – by becoming less visible in a ‘closed’ market.

If open markets are effectively open to anyone who comes looking,⁸ closed markets are characterised by a concern on the part of dealer to maintain some control over those they sell to. Sellers prefer to have a regular client base that they maintain and new customers usually need some kind of recommendation from someone the seller knows to reassure that they are who they say they are. Closed markets tend to have lesser levels of violence attached to them and are often less visible to the broader community.

STRUCTURED AND FRAGMENTED MARKETS

As stated above, the idea that drug markets are a rigidly structured market controlled by a few big players (be they individuals, crime syndicates or gangs) belies the fact that a picture of any one part of the market (for example, the cannabis market) will be made up of many types of seller and organisational shapes (for example, single importers/growers; friend-only sellers; groups of collaborators with no essential hierarchy; groups of collaborators with clear hierarchy; those that control a ‘patch’ or local area, and/or areas where there is almost no obvious control by any one group). Research suggests that on the whole drug markets are fragmented, disjointed and the various parts often only loosely connected – if at all.

Historical and geographical context will also play a part in terms of what the organisational picture looks like. In those areas where the drug trade was initiated by a particular group or groups that held a monopoly over supply – as occasionally happens – top down control can lead to predictable patterns of supply and consistent market practices. The monopoly can also produce inflated prices and poorer quality drugs due to lack of competition. The establishment of new markets and new competition however can, initially at least, lead to ‘turf wars’ and elevated violence until the market reaches some equilibrium. Even here, however, the level of violence reached can be influenced by numerous factors such as the criminal justice response and the culture of violence already embedded within the practices of those in the traditional market and those fostering the new one(s). Some research on rural (village, small town) heroin and cocaine markets in the UK has shown that in such contexts there is a tendency for them to conform only

⁸Within reason, dealers in open markets do try to control who they sell to as they have to be wary of undercover police. This control however usually means little more than feeling that they can simply ‘know’ when someone is a genuine client or an existing drug user by the way they talk, act and dress – a strategy that has led to many an arrested street dealer (Jacobs, 2000).

marginally to stereotypical views of drugs markets (Few et al., 2004). Sellers were commonly known (and had been for many years) to those they sold to, heroin-based market interaction was overwhelmingly social as opposed to business-like and the use of violence or the threat of it as a means to manage transactions was largely absent. Even within such small geographical spaces the existence of market separation (that is, between substances and sellers) was evident.

While the overall picture is one of fragmentation, it is also the case that some historical patterns of supply have emerged. In the USA and some other countries, for example, Hells Angels appear to have a consistent relationship with the manufacture and supply of amphetamines, and various ethnic groups with links from producer countries often also reproduce patterns of supply with a racial, cultural or ethnic basis. The point to be made is that while we can see some of these patterns it is often unhelpful to see these patterns as exclusive behaviours. Ethnic and cultural groupings often do not act exclusively (that is, supplying to their own groups only nor predictably).

Some drug markets also appear to 'sit outside' the conventional drug market. In the UK, for example, the 'social supply' of recreational (mostly cannabis) drugs among friends and acquaintances means that most young cannabis users rarely come into contact with the real drug market itself.

TYPES OF DRUG AND MARKET TYPE

Certain drugs tend to be associated with different types of market, market dangers and organisation. As is common with drug-related issues, there is a tendency to overly attribute this difference to the pharmacology of the drugs in question. Cannabis markets have therefore been understood to – on the whole – be less violent than crack cocaine markets for this reason. The crack cocaine market of the mid- to late-1980s in New York City, for example, was associated with extreme levels of drug market violence, gun crime and murder whereas a later market involving various substances in the same city has been characterised by a rejection of guns and an approach to supply which is comparatively peaceful (Curtis et al., 2002) and the emergence of crack cocaine markets in other nations did not necessarily produce particularly violent markets.

While it is the case that the level of violence in drug markets *overall* is much greater than its occurrence in legal markets, this is in part a result of drug market structures (illegal trading in a market comprising significant numbers of criminals) and culturally based responses by those occupying the market whose day-to-day practices involve problem resolution through cultures of violence. This does not mean, however, that being involved in drug selling or supply means either being routinely exposed to violence or committing it. The personnel differences in the drug market simply mean that *some* parts of the market and *some* actors are more likely to succumb to and/or perform violent acts than others. Given this, we also have to be wary of any assumption that all that is actually attributed to drug market violence is actually that. One study in a particularly notorious suburb of Sydney, Australia, for example, suggests that even in the

most violent types of drug market the 'lived' experience of it for those at the sharp end of the drug market is often far less than assumed and the attempts by the same actors to avoid violent activity much greater than assumed (Coomber and Maher, 2006).

SUMMARY

Overall, we can say that drug markets do not routinely and consistently conform to the stereotypes of them so widely presented. They differ in make-up, personnel, structure and form. Their pattern can shift over time and they are subject to historical, geographical and circumstantial contexts. Each of these will affect the types of activity that take place, the interactions therein and the level of violence found there.

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Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking refers to the movement and supply of illicit drugs for gain. Drugs initially have to be made (plants cultivated, products produced/synthesised) and then they have to be transported to their various destinations where they will be consumed. Those that export and import drugs and transport them within and beyond nations are called drug traffickers. Those that sell drugs to consumers are more commonly understood as drug dealers (see also 33 drug dealers).