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The *Unusual Suspects*: An Educated, Legitimately Employed Drug Dealing Network

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Abstract

This paper challenges the mainstream discourse that is often used to conceptualise illegal drug supply. In particular, it questions the assumption that drug dealers and the markets they inhabit are a social aberration, restricted primarily to social outsiders operating in socially and economically marginalised communities. Drawing on six years of ethnographic fieldwork with 25 "conventional" working-class "lads" the paper makes two overarching arguments. First, that the illegal drug trade market is by no means confined to violent or marginalised subsets of drug distributors. Second, that the organisation and structure of the observed drug distribution network was such that it was neatly entwined into the fabric of regular (i.e. conventional) routines. The paper concludes that criminological research must move towards better conceptualising the so-called "silent majority" of drug dealers if we are to accurately reframe the current reductionist drugs discourse.

Key words: drug supply, drug dealing, drug trafficking, ethnography, criminal stereotypes

Introduction

The illicit drug trade is big business. At an estimated \$320bn annually (UNODC, 2005) the illicit drug economy accounts for between 0.6-0.9% of global Gross Domestic Product (UNODC, 2011) and boasts revenues akin to those of Microsoft, Apple, Starbucks and the entire global film box-office combined (based on gross revenues posted for 2014). With a quarter-billion people (5.2% of the world's population) estimated to have consumed an illegal drug at least once in the preceding year (UNODC, 2015) it is also an economy that caters to a sizeable consumer base. Yet despite its scale Antonopolos & Papanicolaou (2010, p. 3) note "there is still dire need for research on the realities of drug markets as a whole, especially from within grounds that somehow elude the attention of mainstream drug discourses". This paper addresses this concern and challenges the dominant "reductionist drugs discourse"

(Taylor, 2016) which positions those who consume, procure or trade illegal drugs away from — and indeed in opposition to — mainstream society and values. The paper draws upon six-years of ethnographic fieldwork to explore the characteristics and operational realities of 25 drug dealers and traffickers who successfully operated at varying levels of various supply chains in tandem with overarching conventional (legitimate) endeavours.

It is the paper's contention that the illegal drug trade is by no means a social aberration confined to a particular subset of "usual suspects" existing on the margins of civil society, but is instead interwoven into the fabric of mainstream society. Though scholarly accounts of illegal drug supply are most commonly "bound up with biographies of social exclusion and poverty" (Ancrum, 2014, p. 71) there is a small but growing body of literature that assesses drug markets situated amongst society's more privileged groups, such as Mohamed & Frisvold's (2010) study of university "dorm room dealers" and Jacques and Wright's (2015) study of young suburban suppliers. This paper adds to that body of literature. It begins with a critical discussion of the dominant discourse, before outlining counterweighting evidence that has begun challenging the "'Us'... versus 'Them' mentality" (Hobbs & Antonopolous, 2013, p. 45).

Key findings from the current ethnography are then presented. First, by outlining personal and group characteristics and drawing distinction between them and the usual suspects of the illegal drug trade. Second by assessing the logistical features of their respective trades, which enabled drug supply to be entwined with conventional daily/weekly routines. In presenting this data, the paper will further elucidate the notion that “the cast [of drug offenders] is far more varied than prevailing images would lead one to believe” (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991, p. 74).

The Dominant Mainstream Narrative: The Usual Suspects

To date, political discourse, government policy and the media have persistently presented the illegal drugs trade as a hostile economy “removed from the fabric of mainstream society” (Taylor, 2008, p. 371). Drug markets have been widely depicted as unrestrained and uncivilized arenas (Boyd, 2002; Coomber, 2006) within which “evil” “others” and “outsiders” (Antonopoulos & Papanicolaou, 2010; Taylor, 2008) — including “alien” (i.e. foreign) organised crime groups (Hobbs & Antonopolous, 2013), urban street gangs (Densley, 2014) or “native-born drug addicts” (Paoli & Reuter, 2008, p. 19) — prey upon an “underclass” (Buchanan and Young, 2000) of “unproductive,

untrustworthy and out of control” addicts (Smith & Riach, 2016, p. 36). Such sensationalism is nothing new. From the late 1970s the drugs discourse became highly politicized, morally charged, prone to racial and class prejudice (Reinarman, 1994; Wacquant, 2009) and was at times underpinned by methodologically flawed studies or inaccurate media reports (e.g. Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

During this period, certain groups became emblematic of the illicit drug economy in Western culture — they are what we may consider the “usual suspects” of the illegal drug trade. They are often, though not always, black, minority ethnic (Alexander, 2012; Eastwood, Shiner, & Bear, 2013) or migrant groups (Boyd, 2002; Paoli & Reuter, 2008) who reside and operate in dispossessed urban communities — known pejoratively as the North American ghetto or European “sink estate”. These groups are disproportionately targeted and punished by law enforcement agencies for drug offences (e.g. Eastwood et al., 2013; Wacquant, 2009) and are subsequently over-represented within many Western criminal justice systems (e.g. Alexander, 2012; Paoli & Reuter, 2008). For instance, Beckett, Nyrop, & Pfingst, (2006) identified significant disparities with how authorities in Seattle policed the city’s drug markets, with police concentrated overwhelmingly on black and Latino crack markets whilst seemingly

ignoring the predominantly white neighbourhood of Capitol Hill and its thriving outdoor drug markets. They conclude that “white people who engage in drug transactions outdoors are simply not perceived as drug offenders by Seattle police officers” (p436, see also Wacquant, 2009, p. 62). In England and Wales, Eastwood et al.’s (2013) analysis of Ministry of Justice and police force data on illegal drugs showed demonstrable racial and ethnic disparities in terms of stop and search tactics, drug arrests, court proceedings, and custodial sentences, with black and mixed-race groups bearing the brunt of these measures despite roughly the same propensities of drug use as their white counterparts.

The dominant narrative on illegal drugs, then, is one in which subsets of “outsiders” are seen to threaten the normative bases of (civil) society. It is propagated by media caricaturisation, biased policing practices, government policy and, to paraphrase Hobbs (2013, p. 2), the harvesting of “low-hanging fruit” by the criminal justice system. Thus, as Caulkins, Reuter and Coulson neatly summarise, “moral panic, racial prejudice, and sheer ignorance [have] fouled deliberations over the last century” in the debate about drug markets (2011, p. 1886).

A Supported Narrative?: The Manifestation of Drug Markets within Empirical Literatures

To date, empirical work examining the organisation of drug markets and/or the role and motives of groups and individuals operating within them has concentrated overwhelmingly on socially and economically marginalized urban populations – i.e. the usual suspects (see for instance Briggs, 2010; Bucerius, 2007; Duck, 2015; Hoffer, 2006 among many others). This trend is by no means novel: Tewksbury and Mustaine (1998, p. 43) note that over 20 years ago drug market research was focused on “major urban ‘drug centers’... [and] high poverty areas”. Indeed, within the criminological and sociological literatures drug markets are commonly manifested within the context of violent and at times territorial street gangs (or street gang affiliates) operating among impoverished minority populations; this trend is true of studies from the United Kingdom (e.g. Harding, 2014; Windle & Briggs, 2015); the United States (e.g. Jacobs, 2000; Venkatesh, 2006); Scandinavia (e.g. Leinfelt & Rostami, 2012; Sandberg, 2008); Latin America (e.g. Desmond Arias, 2014; Rodgers, 2006) and beyond. By contrast, drug markets situated within less (traditionally) criminogenic environments, which cater to and are operated by more privileged demographics, have eschewed the same level of academic scrutiny (see also Page & Singer, 2010, p. 9).

Such empirical disparity is likely the result of three key factors. First, the use and supply of illegal drugs are often tangential components of studies whose broader empirical focus concerns the social and economic inequities facing marginalised populations (e.g. Goffman, 2014; Harding, 2014; Venkatesh, 2006). Criminal activities, including the use and sale of illegal drugs, are indeed prominent features of daily life within these communities (Tonry, 1995) and are thus present in the associated research outputs. Second, dense urban centres have traditionally exhibited higher concentrations of open drug markets (e.g. Harocopos & Hough, 2005: 10; Paoli, 2000;), which are both more visible and more accessible than clandestine closed-markets, making the identification of “serious [drug] offenders” within these environments “easy” for social scientific analysis (Jacobs, 2006, p. 159). Third, the most noxious and conspicuous elements of the illegal drug trade — namely systemic crime (i.e. market violence), problematic drug use and its associated health risks — are concentrated in urban areas, among those living in low-income homes, in social housing and/or employed in low-skilled occupations (e.g. Reuter & Stevens, 2007; Stephens, 2011, p. 21), hence the greater empirical attention.

In short, the drug offending populations and participants examined in most relevant academic literature are the same ones who feature (disproportionately) within criminal justice figures, the media and political discourse. By virtue of the heightened scholarly attention paid to these groups (relative to other demographics) it is possible to conclude, as Bean (2014, p. 160-1) has, that “[m]ost but not all drug markets will be in inner-city areas serving mixed ethnic and transient populations [...] At the street level, whether the markets are open or closed, they invariably operate in low-class neighbourhoods with the bulk of the resident population living in poor conditions”. Yet, as Coomber warns (2006, p. 146), “too much of a focus on any one kind of group or market can over homogenise the image presented [...] as with numerous crime statistics, the demographic evidence available may not be representative of the populations we want to know about”.

A Counter-Narrative: The *Unusual* Suspects

There is a small but growing body of research challenging the “‘Us’... versus ‘Them’ mentality” (Hobbs & Antonopolous, 2013, p. 45). Adler (1983), Waldorf et al. (1991), Hobbs (1995) and Desroches (2006) were some of the first to offer an

alternative (or additional) narrative beyond that of "others" and "outsiders". They each identify diverse sets of actors at varying stages of the illicit drug economy, from self-employed business women and men to former law-enforcement personnel and servicemen. Desroches notes for instance that of the 70 convicted upper-level drug traffickers he studied, 50 lived "relatively law-abiding lives apart from their involvement in the drug trade [...] [with] lengthy employment histories or business experiences" (2006, p. 44). Similarly, recent ethnographic research has emphasised the prominence of otherwise conventional retail-level drug dealers who facilitate supply among their own respective suburban or "middle-class" populations, but whose involvement goes largely undetected and unsanctioned (Jacques & Wright, 2015; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Taylor & Potter, 2013). Such studies diverge from much of the criminological literature by depicting burgeoning drug markets far removed from the milieu of social disorganisation, street violence, urban poverty and gangsterdom. The men and women featured within these counter-narratives are generally employed, educated (or else currently in education) and, predominantly, white. Whether by virtue of their race, privileged social standing, or more discreet operational practices, this "silent majority" (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010) of dealers and traffickers operate with ostensible

impunity from law enforcement and without the same analytic attention given to their socially marginalised counterparts.

Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) and the US's National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) appear to support this counter-narrative. First, they indicate that general drug use is distributed fairly evenly across socioeconomic, racial and ethnic groups (Shiner, 2009; Tonry, 1995) with the highest prevalence rates found among white university/college students (Alexander, 2012; Bennett & Holloway, 2014). Second, they demonstrate that most users acquire their drugs from friends, neighbours, colleagues, or family members, with only a minority sourcing drugs from "drug dealers" (e.g. Lader, 2015, p. 7; SAMHSA, 2010, p. 28) – or what respondents may consider archetypal "dealers" (i.e. the usual suspects). Though the CSEW and NSDUH overlook populations whose drug habits are likely to be problematic such as prisoners or the homeless (Caulkins & Pacula, 2006) their findings at the very least advocate a more nuanced assessment of drug markets than we currently have — one in which consumers, sellers, transactions, and the market exist within all strata of society. Indeed, NSDUH data reveals that rates of self-avowed dealing are also distributed evenly among racial and ethnic groups, and that almost

one-quarter of those for those aged 18-25 professing to having dealt drugs reside in households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more (Vaughn, Salas-Wright, DeLisi, Shook, & Terzis, 2015)

In summary, the notion that drug dealers are inexorably social "outsiders" operating on society's margins is challenged by both ethnographic and household survey data. This paper adds to this small but growing body of ethnographic work that challenges the dominant drugs narrative. It identifies otherwise conventional working-class lads for whom drug dealing was simply another form of work to be undertaken alongside conventional activities and commitments. The paper will now outline the study's methods, before describing the groups' characteristics and assessing the methods by which drugs were sold and thus embedded within their conventional lives.

The Study

The findings presented here originate from an extensive body of data, generated as part of a six-year ethnography (2006 to 2012) of 25 males that, for the purposes of this study, are termed *The Lads*. The study was concerned principally with assessing their seemingly paradoxical commitment to conventional norms/ideals as well as to a

deviant and often criminal lifestyle. Participants were located and recruited via the author's social contacts, which were established during adolescence. Participants consented to the study yet it was left to the discretion of participants whether the researcher role was made known to their affiliates. The use of one's pre-existing relations in studying drug offenders is by no means novel (cf. Adler, 1993; Jacques & Wright, 2015; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010) and is ostensibly one of the few means by which researchers can identify and access clandestine closed drug dealing networks.

Thousands of hours were spent in the company of this network systematically observing participants as they interacted with customers and suppliers (at varying levels of the supply chain), conventional work colleagues and family members. The author observed many elements of *The Lads'* UK operations (e.g. cash and drug pickups/drop-offs; the selection of stash sites; the processing of drugs; the packaging of consignments; the cultivation of marijuana, etc.) and travelled to Ibiza to document and interview those participants involved in cross-border trafficking and supply. Ad hoc semi-structured interviews were undertaken daily, whenever further insight was needed e.g. inquiring about a customer following a transaction, or asking a supplier to elaborate on their decision to change wholesalers. These on-the-spot conversational

inquiries were recorded in anonymised digitised note form. Field observations and ad hoc interviews were supplemented by more structured interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two-hours, and were designed to elicit more detailed or reflexive information from participants. For example, after noting the widespread use of (informal) credit within various supply-chains the author undertook in-depth interviews with 12 participants specifically directed toward this topic, including their experience of sourcing drugs on credit; frequency of customers getting into debt; consequences of customers falling into debt; determining creditworthiness of a customer, etc.

As with any self-disclosed data, there is the possibility that some participants lied, distorted or misremembered accounts provided during interview. The veracity of their statements regarding events not directly observed by the author – such as the physical smuggling activities – may thus be questioned. Where possible unobserved events were corroborated via field observations made before or after the event, by speaking to others present or involved (e.g. trade partners or suppliers), or by some other means (e.g. viewing pay-slips, business records or newspaper articles). In

addition, interviewees were made aware that they and their responses were anonymized and otherwise kept confidential.

It should be noted that participants switched occupational classifications during the course of the study, thus the accompanying descriptors provided alongside participant quotations may change depending upon the year of study.

Group Characteristics

The Lads' cohort was the composite of several smaller overlapping social cliques that formed during adolescence and comprised 21 White-British and 4 British-Pakistani males. Participants resided in and operated from two North England boroughs located a short distance from each other, referred to here as *Tannerstown* and *South City*. Despite their collective, cooperative and profitable involvement in the illegal drug trade, dealing itself was generally an ancillary feature of the group's social interactions. The most pronounced disparities between this cohort and the drug trade's *usual suspects* relates to the relative conventionality of their lives. As the following three sections will illustrate, these young men were not social "outsiders" affiliated to any established criminal group such as a "street gang" or "crime family". Nor were they

subjected to the same occupational insecurities and economic struggles encountered by many other sections of the former industrial working classes (e.g. Hall, Winlow & Ancrum, 2013; Reding, 2009). *The Lads* were, by comparison, relatively privileged in terms of their social and economic standing and saw themselves as part of an aspiring and upwardly mobile working class (see Nayak, 2003) willing to utilise legal or criminal opportunities to better their situation. Their key social and individual characteristics are detailed below.

Family Households: Non-Affluent, but Hardworking

When we were little, my mum and dad had the shop [...] which was open seven-days a week [...] My dad's a grafter, man. I'd only see him in the morning when he'd take us to school.

Khalid, 25 | Financial advisor | Cocaine retailer

Growing up *The Lads's* households tended to be stable, both in terms of family structure and employment. 18 individuals had grown up in households with two

guardians present, seven came from single parent households. Their parents had worked in occupations that included: secretarial and administrative work; bar work; work in care homes; manual work; retail; education (i.e. teachers); factory work; factory management and civil engineering; four participants came from families who managed small independent businesses. Relative to the UK's average, household family incomes during childhood were often low (under £30,000 gross annual earnings), though seven of the households were comparatively affluent (up to £60,000 gross annual earnings). Despite at times lacking the prestige associated with certain middle-class occupations (see Galbraith, 1992) legitimate work and hard graft were part-and-parcel of their parents' lives. Drug dealing and economic crime more generally was not a source of revenue/work outwardly encouraged or endorsed. In short, the study's participants had grown up in law-abiding households that practiced and promoted pro-social norms and values, particularly in relation to how one earned a living.

Offending Histories (Prior to Dealing): "No Angels"

I don't reckon we were ever proper-bad lads as kids, but we were no fuckin' angels either — we all did daft shit.

Petty acts of crime and delinquency were reoccurring features during adolescence and 14 of *The Lads* held, one-off criminal records as a result of minor offending. Such offences (of which the vast majority went undetected and unpunished) ranged from assault and vehicle theft, to small-scale cannabis sales and theft from the workplace. Their offending histories prior to dealing/trafficking, though chequered, were not especially remarkable or prolific with regards to UK adolescent males of a similar age during that period (see Philips & Chamberlain, 2006). *The Lads'* drug use also appears unremarkable for males in their age group at this time (see Roe & Man, 2006): cannabis was used frequently, while amphetamine, ecstasy, and cocaine were used intermittently. Delinquent behaviour, though present, was not so pronounced or consistent as to set *The Lads* apart from many of their contemporaries. Much of their delinquency went undetected allowing future development and occupational prospects to progress unencumbered (see also Singer, 2014). As they transitioned into their twenties a qualitative shift in offending occurred. Petty criminality tapered off while the

supplying/trafficking of drugs and the occasional issuing of bellicose threats or use of force to coerce repayments became increasingly prevalent. Yet despite this escalation in offending severity, only one individual was ever caught and punished (imprisoned) for drug supply offences.

Education and Work: Dealers with Respectable Résumés

Really, whose gonna look at Marshall a fuckin' mortgage advisor driving round in his *sensible* car, or Bear working for [a prestigious employer, listed on the FTSE-250] living in his kush [good] apartment, or any of the lads, really, and think "yeah, those lads there, they're dealers"? [...] You can't really get any more legit[imate].

Cliff, 24 | Small-business owner | Cocaine retailer/mid-level runner

Dealing/trafficking opportunities arose rapidly during their transition to adulthood (early-to-mid-twenties) and were utilised to supplement their legitimate earnings (see Fagan & Freeman, 1999). Conventional roles took precedence throughout

their drug dealing careers. This included commitments to university (undergraduate and postgraduate levels), establishing and managing small businesses, as well as working within a host of occupations. Occupational roles included: teaching support; High street banking (teller, financial and mortgage advising); competitive graduate schemes; personal fitness; administration; administration management; hospitality; hospitality management; nightclub security; sound engineering; electrical engineering; mechanical engineering; call centre work; construction; and taxiing. By their mid-twenties most had attained some form of qualification beyond those obtained from high school: five individuals had attained industry-specific credentials/qualifications; 17 had qualified from a technical or academic college; 10 had graduated from university with a bachelor's degree; and five had proceeded to attain postgraduate qualifications.

Group Characteristics: Summary

The Lads' personal characteristics and their upbringings lie in stark contrast with much that is written about dealers/traffickers (e.g. Bean, 2014; Shammas, Sandberg & Pedersen, 2014). They had grown up in stable and law-abiding, working-class households, situated in non-marginalised communities. They were educated

(academically or vocationally), ambitious, and well integrated into “conventional” society and Western meritocratic ideology. Despite demonstrating a propensity to take risks, rule-break (the hallmarks of free market capitalism) and a penchant for recreational drug use, there was no distinctive set of childhood risk factors that could have accurately predicted their progression into the drug economy. Crucially for this paper, *The Lads* maintained and developed conventional roles at the same time as they advanced within the illicit drug trade. How was this possible? How did these individuals commit to both the legitimate *and* the criminal economy? The remainder of the paper shall address the logistical features of drug dealing; it will show how drug dealing activities readily complemented conventional work-life routines.

The Behaviour, Organisation and Structure of the Market

The drug markets *The Lads* inhabited were worlds apart from the dramatic arenas depicted in popular culture and differed markedly even from trades featured in much of the scholarly literature. A few key features help define the observed trades. First, markets were porous and individuals “oscillated” freely in and out of various supply chains (see also Adler & Alder, 1983), between distribution stages

(retail/wholesale/import-export), and between substances (e.g. cocaine to ketamine) without adverse reaction from other parties such as their market competitors or suppliers. Second (and relatedly), drugs were sold and trafficked within largely non-hostile social settings (see also Coomber, 2015). Ironically, the author's experiences with *The Lads* indicate that violence was more pronounced in the highly policed night-time leisure economies of *Tannerstown* and *South City* than within these drug markets, which were largely (though not always) peaceful arenas. Third, there was little complexity in terms of the logistical tasks or risk-mitigation procedures that were employed, meaning the "work" of these dealers was straightforward, routinized and easily integrated into conventional routines. Below are summaries of the operational and logistical features of the trade at the retail- and mid-levels. They demonstrate how drug sales aligned themselves alongside conventional lifestyles.

Drug Delivery Services: Retailing Illicit Drugs

I'll finish work [17.00] and head straight to the gym with Tee [dealing partner] and them guys. Usually done around six [or] six-thirty [p.m.] unless we go sauna [...]. Soon as we're out we'll grab the bud [cannabis from our stash], do a few

drop-offs [deliveries], grab a bit of scrab [food] [...] and then we'll just be parked up chilling with all the boys [...] Do a few more drop-offs whenever we get calls [...] That's basically it. I'm back home chillin' with brew and spliff, and in bed for 11[p.m.] for work [the next day] [...] We're getting about three-ton [£300] each a week. So nowhere near earning the same as [some of Lads] but, still, it's pretty much doubling my wage at the minute.

Abu, 22 | Family business employee | Cannabis retailer

For the purposes of this paper the retail level of the illicit drug economy encompasses the final transaction in a supply chain i.e. sales made to consumers. The retail sphere of the observed trade networks were typified by comparatively large numbers of low-volume-unit sales e.g. 35-70 x "grams" of cocaine or 40-100 x "£20-bags" of cannabis to be sold in one-week selling-cycles. Dealers/dealing-partnerships tended to specialise in just one substance (usually cocaine n=12 or cannabis n=9), however some participants occasionally sidelined in other drugs such as ketamine,

MDMA, or Valium. On average, cannabis retailers netted between £250-£500 profit per week, while cocaine retailers netted between £350-£1050 a week.

“Drop-off” delivery services were the main method by which drugs were distributed at this stage of the supply chain; only three dealers permitted customer collections from their residence. As Marshall (a mortgage adviser in a High street bank, operating then as a cocaine dealer) explains, “I don't want people turning up at my house at whatever time of day. Anyway, people are going to prefer me dropping-off [...] Like Domino's [Pizza] [...] most people just want it delivered right to their door”.

Delivery services and the ability to simply switch-off their “work phone” provided a degree of separation between their home lives and drug sales, which was essential for those still living in their parents' households. Most delivery services (n=17) operated between 18:00 and 23:00, Monday-to-Thursday, and flexible hours Friday nights and weekends. These hours of operation reflected the fact that both dealers and consumers spent most of their days engaging in conventional activities. *The Lads* generally worked or studied full-time, which restricted trade opportunities to periods outside of these commitments i.e. evenings and weekends. Customers maintained similar commitments, which likewise constrained their ability and willingness to source and consume illicit

drugs to evenings or weekends. In short, consumer demand and the retail distribution services documented here did not exist during regular “nine-to-five” workday hours.

Though there existed clear variations in consumer demographics and consumption patterns, the vast majority of customers were not “vulnerable youngster[s]” or “hardened addict[s]”, but “otherwise law-abiding and hard-working citizens” (Pearson, 2001, p. 192). The following interview excerpts exemplify *The Lads’* consumer base; the statements make reference to co-workers who, via everyday legitimate interaction, came to form part of their clientele (see also, Curcione, 1997, p. 243-244; Jacques & Wright, 2015, p. 44-45).

I’ve got all sorts. Decent people, middle-class people [...] There’s Steve [...] he’s like 37 or 41 [years old], teaches golf or is a professional golfer [...] Earns pure money [...] I’ve got this thing where I hide [the cocaine] under the wheel arch of his Porsche whenever he wants any [...] I think that’s coz he’s got his kids on weekends and doesn’t want to make it obvious [...] Most my guys are ordinary people [...] just working in like 9-to-5 jobs and just want a bit of “sniff” on the weekend. There’s [a customer] who I do the taxi’s with [...] [another] who’s a

sparky [electrician], [another] who's a trady [tradesman] for his dad's [business], [another] who manages [a local pub]. There are a few [customers] who're a bit rough.

Cliff, 26 | Taxi driver / Cocaine retailer and mid-level runner

I had [three] colleagues [when I worked for an administration department] who'd buy [cannabis] off me all the time [...] You'd have a quiet spell and then someone like Jacko would give me a cheeky little wink and ask if I was about later. I'd be like, "Yes mate, I'll bob-on over" [...] This one lady, Lauren, who was pretty senior in the office [...] she'd never really 'let on' to arrange anything when we were in the office, but she'd call [later asking] after a few bags for her fella [partner] once-twice a week".

Tee, 23 | Postgraduate student | Cannabis retailer

The majority of drug transactions in the observed markets occurred at the retail level, in the private setting (usually the customer's home), via one of these delivery service. There were few entry requirements or industry-specific skills other than the requisite social networks, a willingness to break the law (see also Hobbs, 2013) and a sound enough reputation for those requiring consignments on credit (see also Møller & Sandberg, 2015). Retail dealing was thus an attractive and comparatively profitable form of casual or supplementary work during *The Lads'* early-to-mid-twenties. Revenues funded anything from holidays and basic living expenses, to university fees and legitimate business start-ups. The simplicity of these tasks, coupled with the fact customer demand fell outside regular working hours, made the role of a retail dealer simultaneous desirable — especially while in education or in jobs perceived to be low-paid — yet, in the long-term, wearisome. In contrast to the experiences of certain "street dealers" (Sandberg, 2008) or socially privileged "pseudo-gangstas" (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010) drug dealing in this context, was neither glamorous nor exciting. The following vignette demonstrates the casual and mundane nature of these delivery services.

Cliff and I stood outside in the cold November air as we smoked. Cliff rubbed an almost imperceptible smudge off his beloved Audi convertible – an item, as with so many of his current belongings, paid for with drug money. As evening drew close customers began placing their orders. His phone rang. He answered immediately. “Hello!... Yeah good thanks, you?... Yeah, I’m just about to head out. I’ll head round in the next hour or so, I just have to see a few people first... Sound [cool]. In-a-bit”. Though brief in content and duration, the call was evidence of yet another sale lined-up.

We drove towards Cliff’s personal drug stash site, a secluded patch of undergrowth located on a long stretch of quiet country lane, before making our way to the first customer’s residence. “December’s coming up fast”, he said, “I’m gonna be busy as fuck all through the month. All me [university] assignments are due in before Christmas, and [cocaine] sales are going to start going crazy”. Cliff had dealt cocaine throughout much of his degree studies. Despite having profited from it he had always viewed dealing as a temporary means to an end — “at the end of the day it’s just easy money”, but “I don’t want to be doing

this much longer if I can help it". He was midway through a master's degree and hoped to secure a well-paid graduate job in his field after graduation, at which point he planned to relinquish his dealer role.

The first customer of the night lived in pleasant suburban cul-de-sac. Eve was a self-employed beautician in her mid-thirties. She opened her front door and invited us both in. We chatted as Cliff casually handed over three "grams" of cocaine. "Cheers hun. I know we owe for three already" she said, "I'll give you two-hundred on Monday, if that's alright". Cliff nodded, "Yeah, no worries". We stayed and talked for five minutes more before we returned to the car. "I've just got to head to Stevie's [another customer], he's heading out in the next half-hour, then we'll go see Ric and another lad...". The evening proceeded in unremarkable fashion. Cliff and his customers talked briefly about work, upcoming holidays and home decoration. Little was said with regards to the drug transaction taking place. Once the final delivery of the evening had been made we headed over to Depp's house, where five of *The Lads* were already "chilling": smoking cannabis and playing the PlayStation. "Abu!" Cliff shouted

over the sound of the TV, "Is it alright to grab a bag of green [cannabis] off you?"

Financial remuneration proved to be retail drug dealing's only enduring reward. Khalid — then a financial advisor in a High street bank (and night time cocaine dealer) — explained: "Any idiot could do it. It's just driving to someone's gaff [house] and handing over the order". The mundane reality of this criminal marketplace is by no means limited to this cohort; Hobbs (1995) identified similar lacklustre feelings among retailers operating in similar environments. Despite the monotony of operating a drug delivery service over several years during ones "spare" time, the substantial profits ensured willing participation among this cohort during much of their twenties, until their conventional (legitimate) commitments began to pay dividends (e.g. better paid work) or take precedent (e.g. greater commitment to a personal relationship), at which point dealing as a secondary occupation became increasingly untenable or unjustifiable.

This section has outlined the procedural and logistical features of the observed retail market. As is common with closed-market traders (May & Hough, 2004) the vast

majority of sales occurred in private settings between known parties (Jacques & Wright, 2015; Taylor & Potter, 2013). As such, the retail markets I observed were largely obscured from view of the public and law enforcement. To the casual observer these young men were committed to, and progressively succeeding in, their legitimate endeavours.

Less is More: Wholesaling, Brokering, Importing and Exporting Illicit Drugs

You'll be surprised at how little I do, Mike. Honest to god mate, I put in about an hour's work a week [...] [My runner] does most the legwork. He'll go pick it up from Henry [the broker in *South City*], brings it back [to *Tannerstown*], weighs it, bags it, gets it out [to the retail dealers], [and] collects the money in the week [...] Then I've got Neander who [...] chases up [outstanding] debts. All I do pretty much is make a few phone calls here-and-there: get the orders from everyone [i.e. retailers], phone Henry, and get Cliff [and others] to do the running 'round.

Sol, 26 | Warehouse logistics and small-business owner | Cocaine wholesaler

The mid-level of the observed trade was typified by comparatively small numbers of high-volume-unit sales e.g. 9 x single-ounces of cocaine or 5 x "nine-bars" (9oz) of cannabis in a one-week selling-cycle. Those operating a wholesale, import or export enterprise tended to deal only one substance at any one time (cocaine n=3, cannabis n=3, ketamine n=3), however one of *The Lads* (Rushton) concurrently brokered wholesale consignments of cocaine, cannabis, ketamine, MDMA, and ecstasy. As with the retailers there was a similar lack of industry-specific skill among the mid-level traffickers. Their key attributes came from being positioned within the necessary social networks through which high-volume trade could be facilitated, as well as having sufficient reputation (or an intermediary's vouch) to be deemed creditworthy (i.e. trustworthy) for high-value consignments (see also Desroches, 2006, p. 54; Møller & Sandberg, 2015). Due to the size of the losses that could be incurred from a single transaction, trust was particularly salient at these higher distribution stages.

[My suppliers] trust that I'm gonna pay them back and it's the same with my customers: I don't want to be giving it out [on credit] to some cunt who makes

me spend however long chasing them up [...] or having to send fuckin' Tyson [the runner/debt collector] to have words. So as long as I know you're safe and you've never shown yourself to be some spineless cunt I'll give it you on tick [credit], and depending how well I know you I'll give it to a pal of yours [on credit] too if you tell me they're safe.

Rushton, 27 | Business investor | Multi-drug broker

Mid-level enterprises facilitated significantly fewer transactions in a given week than retail operations; this meant less time was needed to distribute stock than at the retail level. Perhaps counterintuitively, mid-level drug trading was often easier to accommodate outside of conventional commitments. For instance, Bear — then a graduate-level professional in the construction industry — distributed a kilogram of ketamine in ounce-multiples every two months; this required a maximum of 35 transactions (often fewer). Bear easily accommodated these comparatively few transactions around his busy work life whilst netting profits of between £3,500-£5,250 per kilo (averaging £509 a week profit). Similarly, Henry — who was employed in

logistics — brokered a single cocaine consignment each week (typically 2—4 x 4.5oz “pucks”): a two-hour task which yielded profits of £500-£1,000 that could be undertaken outside of his regular occupational commitments. Two mid-level suppliers lessened their workloads further by employing trusted third-parties (runners/“grafters”) to undertake the physical tasks such as the transportation and delivery of drugs, and the collection or enforcement of debts. The outsourcing of labour provided one cocaine wholesaler, Sol, sufficient time to hold down a “nine-to-five job” and a Saturday night job as a nightclub “bouncer”, whilst also providing time to acquire and establish legitimate business ventures. As the most prosperous trader in this study, Sol netted upwards of £3,000 profit per week from the wholesaling of cocaine but remained steadfastly committed to his legitimate ambitions, which (ironically) required investment capital from his drug proceeds to stay afloat during turbulent periods. The following vignette of a cocaine runner, as with the previous section’s, illustrates the ease with which operational tasks were entwined into conventional routines. The tasks Marshall (and other runners) undertook each week required only a few hours to complete and were therefore undertaken in tandem with other (conventional) commitments.

Marshall worked as a mortgage adviser in a local high street bank and was currently being trained for a managerial role within the branch. For almost three months Marshall had been moonlighting as Sol's interim cocaine "runner", covering the duties of Sol's regular runner who was abroad on an extended holiday. It was Friday (the day of Sol's logistical operation) and Marshall was dressed in his work attire having just finished work. I accompanied Marshall as he drove to the rendezvous point — a nondescript motorway services located midway between *Tanners Town* and *South City*. We pulled up alongside Henry (the broker from *South City*) who was parked up at a McDonalds "drive-thru". Marshall turned off the engine and went and sat in Henry's car. He returned two minutes later holding a small cylindrical "Pringle" crisp container, containing three "pucks" of cocaine. He placed the container beneath his seat, nodded farewell to Henry and drove off. "Right then", he said jovially, "Let's head back".

We arrived back in *Tanners Town* at around 7pm and headed to a house located a short drive from the town centre. The house belonged to Phil, an associate of

The Lads. A set of small digital scales were already out on the kitchen worktop when we arrived. Marshall, who was now adept at weighing out the stock, quickly divided and packaged the cocaine ready for delivery. He evidently did not wish to stay for longer than was necessary and Phil's attempts at small talk fell on deaf ears. Marshall thanked Phil, handed over a clear bag with roughly 3 grams of cocaine in-lieu of payment for having used his house, and we left.

Marshall delivered the consignments to a total of 14 dealers that evening — several were close affiliates, including to four of *The Lads*. He drove to several of their homes, spending no more than a few minutes in each, or else met them in secluded car parks dotted on the outskirts of town. We had left *Tanners Town* shortly after 5pm. It was now 8.30pm, and Marshall's work was finished for the day. "All that's on tick [credit]... I'll get the money off them next week". "And how much did you earn tonight?", I asked. "This week I'm getting £750, so I can't complain. Mad that! Considering I'm getting £1,200 a month from [the bank]". Marshall stretched and let out a loud groan. "Right then, Mikey. I'll drop

you off now, if that's okay. I've been on the go all day so I just wanna go home, get showered, get something to eat and see the missis [girlfriend] for a bit".

As with the retail and wholesale trades, the cross-border smuggling operations documented in this study were generally uncomplicated affairs. For instance, Henry relocated to Asia to undertake charity work; whilst there he began posting kilogram consignments of Ketamine direct to suppliers back home in the UK, including to three of the study's wholesalers (Bear, Miller, and Rushton). Each kilogram was shipped in vacuum-sealed pouches and hidden among ethnic food provisions and netted Henry approximately £1,500 in profit. Miller, by contrast, suspended his casual work contracts each summer in order to transport ounces of high-purity cocaine to the Spanish island of Ibiza. The cocaine was transported rectally and was subsequently "cut" on the island with a readily accessible diluting agent before being sold on to British dealers positioned in Ibiza's seasonal tourism economy. Miller made multiple return journeys each summer. He 'partied hard' throughout the island's "clubbing season" before returning back to the UK to resume his casual employment, bringing home whatever profits he had accumulated via his one-man smuggling operations.

The most time-consuming and potentially hazardous tasks to be documented in this study relate to the multi-kilo ketamine smuggling operations of Bear and Cliff who, as undergraduates, smuggled Ketamine onto Ibiza during their summer terms. The pair drove and took ferries with their consignments diluted in large water bottles. Once at their apartment the pair boiled off the water and the remaining residue (pure ketamine) was placed in Tupperware and stashed in isolated woodlands a short drive away. Both the physical tasks (i.e. retrieving stock from the stash on a daily basis, delivering stock to dealers on the island) and the networking necessary to develop and sustain distribution links on the island required a level of commitment quite distinct from any other of the documented operations. What is most noteworthy here, however, is how the academic calendar provided extended summer breaks that offered ample opportunity to venture outside their immediate networks/markets without disrupting their overarching pursuits.

What would I rather be doing all summer [in-between academic years]: working in a warehouse [during the day] and dropping off coke in the evening, or selling

drugs in Ibiza where it's mint and sunny and I can party whenever I want? It's not a hard choice

Bear, 22 | University student | Cocaine retailer/runner and ketamine trafficker

In summary, mid-level drug dealing enterprises often required less investment of time than retail ones, but garnered far greater financial returns per transaction. As with retail-level dealing, the associated tasks interwove neatly into *The Lads'* conventional lifestyles. Stock could be distributed over extended selling-cycles (e.g. 35 single-ounce units of ketamine sold over two-months averaged just over four transactions a week) and required fewer sales to generate profits comparable to those at the retail-level, which made mid-level drug distribution an attractive side-venture. Despite the allure of the high revenues and reduced workload, entry into the wholesale markets was dependent upon a person's contacts and positioning within broader trade networks; as such, far fewer of *The Lads* had the necessary networks in place to begin wholesaling than retailing.

Conclusion

This paper set out to challenge mainstream thinking regarding the supply of illicit drugs. Whether propagated through negative stereotypes in the news and entertainment media (Boyd, 2002; Taylor, 2008), reductionist political discourse and government policy (Taylor, 2011, 2016), skewed targeting of law enforcement efforts (e.g. Eastwood et al., 2013) or selective use of law enforcement data (Stevens, 2007), those who consume, purvey or trade illegal drugs are widely portrayed as risk-bearing “others” and “outsiders” (Hobbs & Antonopolous, 2013; Antonopoulos & Papanicolaou, 2010) positioned away from, and often in opposition to, normative civil society. Using data obtained via six years of ethnographic research, this paper has shown how the experiences of 25 men involved in the distribution of illicit drugs contrast sharply with many of the common assumptions associated with the supply of illicit drugs. The study depicts a drug trade far removed from inner-city deprivation, gang territories, violent criminal rivalries and intensive policing. The findings reveal how within *The Lads’* otherwise “conventional” social environments, the commercial selling and trading of illicit drugs proved an operationally viable, economically rational, and ultimately alluring form of work. *The Lads* “grafted” hard in both the legitimate and illicit

economy because they wanted to better their situations — their net earnings from legal and illicit “work” elevated their wages to that of senior professionals (akin to that of senior teachers and UK general surgeons). Their continued efforts within the legitimate economy suggests that these were neither youths disaffected with empty promises of work, nor nihilistic criminals bound to some kind of criminal underworld. And though their petty adolescent offending histories may indicate a propensity for risky behaviour, a willingness to break rules, and for some a hard-edged entrepreneurial disposition, they were by no means an exceptionally delinquent cohort (e.g. Singer, 2014). Crucially, *The Lads* did not commit to drug dealing as a long-term supplementary income. Without the encumbrance of a criminal record or time-served in prison, *The Lads* were free to naturally age-out of these criminal roles unharmed and largely unnoticed, as conventional commitments such as stable relationships and legitimate “career-work” took precedence.

It may be the case that *The Lads* were merely one arrest or custody term away from being like those marginalised agents described in the “usual suspects” literature. Yet they were each privy to a range of protective features that would have likely lessened the collateral consequences of a drug conviction, including having vocational

or academic qualifications, work experience, and supportive parents who could provide stable housing if needed. The “usual suspects” are not marginalised populations simply because of the stringent police surveillance or punitive policies targeted towards them (see Beckett, et al., 2006; Eastwood et al., 2013), but because they are *also* likely to fare poorly in terms of their health outcomes, educational outcomes, occupational outcomes and family stability. For the “usual suspects” the use and sale of drugs are often central components of life (e.g. Briggs, 2010; Hoffer, 2006; Venkatesh, 2006). For *The Lads*, however, their use and sale were merely an ancillary feature of their daily or weekly routines, something to be undertaken among other conventional undertakings.

This study adds to a growing, yet still limited, body of empirical work that brings into question the widely held views of the illicit drug economy. It suggests that the “drug dealer” is not some “other” kind of citizen; their behaviour is not pathological; and drug sales are not simply the forte of poor, inner-city male urbanites. Just as anyone may be an illegal drug user – from unemployed homeless “junkies” (Hoffer, 2006) to students, professors, attorneys/lawyers, dentists (e.g. Waldorf et al., 1991) – so too can anyone become involved in the supply of these drugs, including gang members (e.g. Venkatesh, 2006; Jacobs, 1999); suburban middle-class youth (Jacques

and Wright, 2015); fast-food workers and shop assistants (e.g. Anderson, 2000); economists (Waldorf et al., 1991); affluent college students studying in prestigious universities (Mohamed and Fritsvold, 2010); and legitimate-business entrepreneurs (Desroches, 2005; Hobbs, 2013). Criminological inquiry has begun to broaden its empirical lens regarding the illegal drug trade, yet greater efforts must be made to better conceptualise this everyday (criminal) economy using a more diverse range of actors, particularly from those who form part of the “silent majority” of drug offender (Mohamed & Firstvold, 2010). Further broadening the empirical lens may help redress the “reductionist drug discourse” (Taylor, 2016) that still reigns supreme in many Western countries. Thus far, the state’s punitive approach to the illegal drug “problem” continues to be directed towards people and communities already socially ostracised and economically marginalised. The intensified policing of these groups for drug offences exacerbates their marginalisation when, evidently, the breaching of drug laws is by no means ubiquitous only to these groups.

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