Prosperous Deviance: Drug Trafficking.

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Drug trafficking is a prosperous deviance common to most modernized society. For the purpose of this paper, drug trafficking is defined as any production or movement of illicit drugs whether it be at the international or intra-national level, the city level, or direct selling to users. Drug trafficking may also be conceptualized as any transfer of drugs from one individual to another individual within the drug chain (Desroches, 2001). Drug distribution systems are usually arranged in a hierarchical system in which higher-level traffickers sell their goods to middlemen distributors who in turn sell to other distributors or users (Desroches, 2001). The majority of dealers specialize in one drug, marijuana being the most common. This paper will describe the general characteristics of drug trafficking and the typical characteristics of the drug dealer. Women and their role in drug trafficking will briefly be discussed. Finally, related sociological theories will be applied in attempt to explain the motivation one may have in partaking and continuing in the crime.

The crime of drug trafficking is defined in the Criminal Code under section 462.2 as follows:

***462.2** Every one who knowingly imports into Canada, exports from Canada, manufactures, promotes or sells instruments or literature for illicit drug use is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction*

(a) for a first offence, to a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand dollars or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both; or

(b) for a second or subsequent offence, to a fine not exceeding three hundred thousand dollars or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or to both.

Drug trafficking, in relation to its potential reward versus its punishment, seems to presents itself as a worthwhile crime to partake in.

Drug trafficking is usually portrayed as a victimless crime, as most events occur in private and are executed surreptitiously. However, most people in society view drug dealing as the source of the “drug problem” and so portray it as a very detrimental activity to society.

Money laundering is often involved in drug trafficking since one must often handle large sums of money. Other related crimes include theft, bootlegging alcohol, selling stolen goods, fraud, and embezzlement.

Characteristics of Drug Trafficking

The size of most drug groups are relatively small and are composed of diversified individuals closely knit in a social network (Desroches, 2001). The nature of the size of these drug businesses make it harder for the police to discover them. Additionally, drug traffickers prefer to deal with the least people as possible, in order to have the least number of individuals to trust. These individuals are usually related through kinship, friendship, or ethnic ties. Trust is an integral part of the drug trafficking business (Maher, 1997; Dorn, 1992). That is why potential members of drug organizations are recruited from pre-existing kinship, friendship, or ethnic social networks (Curtis and Maher, 1993). As Maher (1997) states, “it’s the best way to ensure trust among people that can’t use the law”(1997:93). As word-of-mouth communication is so focal to drug businesses, trust is essential to ensure that information is conveyed to only appropriate individuals. The importance of trust will further be discussed in the Women and Drug Dealing section.

Drug trafficking is a sophisticated crime which requires much thought and planning. Although it might not be as complex as computer hacking or safe-breaking, it nonetheless requires many organizational, interpersonal, and entrepreneurial skills. A drug dealer must be knowledgeable about the status quo of their drug network. Successful drug dealers must also be

organized and know how to effectively deal with their “customers” as to keep them satisfied. (Jacobs (1998) offers a very interesting article about the negative reciprocity between seller and buyer, but due to length limitations will not be discussed here.)

The financial gains involved in drug trafficking are potentially very high depending on the dealer’s level within the drug network. This factor affects greatly the various reasons individuals enter the drug business and will be further discussed in the Motivation section.

Violence and drug trafficking are indeed related. The amount of violence involved depends greatly on a constellation of factors including: country, location within city, level of drug selling, and the dealer’s violence history. Since the dealer is selling illicit substances in an unprotected arena, violence becomes a potential safeguard in controlling situations (Henry and Sanford, 1972:158). For example, violence and guns are more of an issue in the U.S. than in Canada, due to different law codes. Additionally, since drug dealing often involves interactions with delinquents, who are more violent by nature, violence in the drug trade is evermore a possibility.

Different types of drug trafficking arise due to different levels of dealing within the drug hierarchy structure. High-level drug trafficking occurs naturally at the top of the hierarchy where the producers transfer the goods to the first trafficker. This sometimes involve crossing international borders, which is very risky but has a potentially high monetary returns. Mid-level traffickers usually continue the process down the drug chain and are somewhat less at risk. Further down the drug chain, lower-level drug dealers are making minimum profits with maximum vulnerability (Maher, 1997:85).

Drug trafficking is on the whole mainly an urban phenomenon due to the nature of the transactions. With the exception of where the production of some drugs takes place (e.g.

marijuana or coca plants), drug transactions occur in populated regions of society. Drugs are in high demand and the social networks that support the businesses are mainly located in urbanized regions. Drug dealers often live in centralized locations within a metropolitan in order to maximize the opportunity for movement within their drug chain.

Characteristics of Drug Dealers

Drug dealers are very diversified in nature and come from various backgrounds. The majority of drug dealers were drug users in their teenage years and were immersed in the drug subculture at an early age. Thus, as a user and purchaser, they are not strangers to the process involved in selling illicit drugs. Eventually, a dealer might progressively become “larger” as he makes new connections within his drug network.

High-level drug traffickers often fall into two categories: businessmen drug traffickers or criminal drug traffickers (Desroches, 2001). The businessmen type dealers usually have owned previous businesses and are typically law-abiding individuals. The criminal drug trafficker type dealers, on the other hand, have been involved in a deviant lifestyle early on and have a record of criminal activities.

Drug dealers range widely in age, from 12 to 70 years old, with a median age usually in the 19 to 23 bracket (Henry and Sanford, 1972:20). The general trend is that older drug traffickers usually occupy the higher levels in the drug hierarchy, while younger dealers occupy the lower ranks. The majority of drug dealers are from the lower to middle socio-economic classes. In Henry and Sanford’s (1972) sample, most of their dealers (84%) were white, about 9% black, and the rest Oriental or mixed. In Canada, similar patterns are most likely the case.

Drug usage and drug trafficking have a special relationship. As previously mentioned, most dealers start by using drugs and eventually commence dealing drugs. This relationship

exists for various reasons. The most common reason stated by dealers for their entry into the drug selling market, is to “support their habit”. Thus, by selling to their friends and a few acquaintances, they were able to sustain their drug habit without expending money. Furthermore, but perhaps of less importance, individuals become accustomed to the social connectedness of the drug networks and so use drug dealing as a way to stay connected within a social network.

Drug traffickers usually deal only one drug at a time. Many dealers sell different drugs throughout their career, commonly starting by dealing the softer drugs. However, drug dealers are immersed in a dense social network of other individuals involved in the drug subculture and so many times *know* where one could acquire a drug she or he does not “carry”.

Criminal recidivism is a common theme for drug dealers. Since profits are high and because individuals usually have many connections to successful dealers, it easy for them to reinstate themselves in the drug network after their release from prison. Drug dealing is very profitable and since many enjoy their deviant lifestyle, the drug subculture becomes their preferred way of life. Lastly, due to the small nature of drug network compositions, the overall flow of drugs is never greatly affected by police busts. Henceforth, there are steady opportunities in the drug world to prosper if one is properly suited for it.

Women’s Role in Drug Trafficking

There has been much controversy concerning women’s role in drug trafficking. Some claim for example, that women experience the same kind of relative success as men (Mieczkowski, 1994). Others suggest that “...social and relational skills and qualities which tend to be assigned to women in a demeaning way by some drug researchers and male drug dealers, may be key resources in forming and operating illicit drug businesses” (Denton and O’Malley, 1999:520). Additionally, it is suggested that female dealers are reputable for supplying a reliable

product as opposed to common male drug practises of “ripping people off” (Denton and O’Malley, 1999:521). On the other hand, some suggest that male prefer to work with other men and that they view women as lacking essential characteristics such as aggressiveness and violentness (Steffensmeier (1983:1013-15). Their participation is usually mediated by boyfriends or other male individuals. They occupy subordinate roles such as “steerers” (Maher, 1997:88) which can be justified by the ‘institutional sexism’ present in the illicit economy (Steffensmeier, 1983). Some reply that women may use threats of violence or use other individuals to deploy their violence (Denton, O’Malley,1999:523), but their credibility is nonetheless never as seriously honored (Campbell, 1993:143).

Motivation for Drug Trafficking

Drug dealers have numerous reasons to enter the drug trafficking business. Among the reasons previously stated, starting a criminal business is generally easier to start since less investment is needed (Akerstrom, 1985:51). Different sociological theories are available to partially explain motivations to traffic drugs. In 1938, Merton extended anomie theory as the disjuncture between goals and means, which he postulated would increase deviance (Williams and McShane, 1993:94). His proposition of *innovation* as a mode of adaptation to anomie is applicable to drug selling. Using this concept, an individual still wants to achieve goals but would reject the normal means for achieving these goals in favour of a deviant means (drug selling). Furthermore, Merton (1968) offers a similar and related theory, differential opportunity theory, which hinges on the fact that individuals have differentials in access to legitimate and illegitimate avenues to achieving their goals (Williams and McShane, 1993:133). Lastly, many individuals explain their entry into the drug world as an opportunity created through business connections (Desroches, 2001).

The motivation to continue selling drugs is again due to various factors. Among the reasons previously stated in describing drug trafficking recidivism, arrests of major dealers occur relatively infrequently and are the result of longwinded and sophisticated investigations by the police (Desroches, 2001). In terms of sociological theories, social learning theory suggests that pleasurable experiences in drug dealing activities make repeating these behaviours more likely. Through operant conditioning, the good social feelings, such as acceptance within their social circle and status achieved in dealing drugs serve as positive reinforcers to continue the drug-selling habit.

Despite its illicit nature, drug trafficking remains a very profitable practise in the eyes of many. Drug trafficking is a complex crime (especially at the international smuggling level) requiring much thought, planning, organization, and social connectedness. Drug dealers are diversified in nature, but usually progress through common stages in becoming higher-level traffickers. Women's role in drug trafficking is commonly thought as being of subordinate nature although certain researchers propose that some of their female-type characteristics actually facilitate their role as drug dealers. Finally, motivation to enter the drug scene is partially explained using Merton's differential opportunity theory while social learning theory offers a hypothesis in explaining the motivation to continue.

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