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Research paper

Non-violent threats and promises among closed-market drug dealers

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ABSTRACT

Background: An unintended consequence of drug prohibitions is that they often fail to absolutely deter potential drug dealers and users and instead restrictively deter them. One way in which dealers sometimes alter their behaviour in response to these prohibitions is by using violent forms of social control to prevent their customers from committing careless behaviour or from becoming police informants. Many dealers, however, are reluctant to use violent forms of social control for various reasons. Little research has explored how these dealers use nonviolent threats and promises to prevent these behaviours among their customers and how these forms of social control then influence their perceptions of the risk of formal punishment.

Methods: To perform this examination, this paper employs information gathered through semi-structured interviews with 33 unincarcerated illicit drug sellers operating in and around St. Louis, Missouri.

Results: This group of drug dealers relied on threats of nonviolent outcomes to prevent their customers from behaving carelessly before, during, and after drug transactions and used implicit promises of continued rewards to dissuade customers from providing information to the police. They presumed that these measures reduced the likelihood of their customers committing these actions. This then decreased their perceptions of the risks of selling illicit drugs.

Conclusion: The present findings suggest that an unintended impact of drug prohibitions is that they sometimes restrictively deter drug dealers instead of preventing them from selling illicit drugs. They also suggest that restrictive deterrence among drug dealers can take the shape of social control. The findings also indicate that friendship norms can serve to inoculate dealers against the threat of formal punishment. Finally, the study suggests that levels of drug market violence may be related more to the nature of the relationships between drug market participants and their cultures.

Background

Many nations throughout the world have drug control policies prohibiting citizens from selling and possessing illicit drugs (Knutsson, 2000; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001; United Nations, 2015; Willis, 2008). The penalties for violating these prohibitions are, in part, intended to prevent citizens from using and/or selling these drugs (Corman & Mocan, 2000; Hough & Natarajan, 2004; Knutsson, 2000; MacCoun, 1993; Spencer, 1995). The assumption that individuals may avoid selling and/or possessing illicit drugs out of fear of these penalties is grounded in the theoretical doctrine of deterrence. This doctrine is based on the notion that individuals first weigh the potential costs and benefits of contemplated actions before following through with them (Becker, 1968; Clarke & Cornish, 1985). An individual is said to be deterred when he or she perceives the costs of a contemplated action as outweighing its benefits and, as a result, does not carry it out (Andenaes, 1974; Gibbs, 1975; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). When the actor refrains entirely from committing the action or any like it, he or she is said to be *absolutely* deterred (Gibbs, 1975).

While it is likely that drug prohibitions absolutely deter many individuals from using and/or selling illicit drugs, one unintended consequence of drug prohibitions is that they may instead *restrictively* deter potential drug sellers and users or, in other words, encourage them to alter their offending behaviour instead of foregoing it altogether (Gibbs, 1975). Jacobs (2010, p. 433) has recently specified four ways potential offenders may be restrictively deterred: they may 1) reduce the frequency of their offending; 2) engage in situational measures (e.g., hiding illicit drugs, driving carefully); 3) commit contemplated crimes at different times or places; or 4) commit crimes of less seriousness. The first three forms of restrictive deterrence are intended to reduce the likelihood offenders will be detected and apprehended

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by police, while the latter is intended to reduce the severity of potential punishment following apprehension (for an excellent overview of restrictive deterrence, see Moeller, Copes, & Hochstetler, 2016). Each, however, have been largely argued to restrict or reduce an offenders' crimes (cf. Gibbs, 1975; Moeller et al., 2016).

In the United States, agents charged with enforcing drug control policies attempt to deter potential illicit drug sellers by aggressively pursuing and punishing individuals for selling and/or possessing even small amounts of many illicit substances, including cannabis, cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, heroin, and MDMA (Levine, 2003; Nadelmann, 1989; Reinarman, 2007). In order to effectively arrest, prosecute, and punish suspected illicit drug sellers and thereby deter others from committing the same crimes, US law enforcement agents must have evidence indicating that suspected sellers have indeed been selling illicit drugs. This evidence can be gathered in several ways. For instance, police officers can personally witness drug sellers and users conducting transactions in public when in the course of routine patrol and then search them and confiscate any illicit drugs on their persons. Officers can also collect evidence by conducting surveillance of suspected drug sellers' interactions and telephone and electronic communications with associates and customers. Finally, police can gather evidence by offering leniency to individuals arrested for possession and/or sales of illicit drugs in exchange for incriminating information about the criminal activities of other drug sellers (Kleiman & Smith, 1990; Moore & Kleiman, 1989).

Illicit drug dealers are generally aware of these strategies and, if they are not absolutely deterred by them, they are sometimes restrictively deterred by them instead (see e.g., Adler, 1993; Decker & Chapman, 2008; Jacques & Reynald, 2012; Johnson & Natarajan, 1995). One way that dealers alter their behaviour, or are restrictively deterred, is by using various means of social control to prevent their customers from committing actions that may draw police attention to drug transactions or may potentially provide police with incriminating evidence of drug sellers' crimes. As used here, social control refers to any social actions used by individuals to control deviant behaviour among others (Black, 1976; Clark & Gibbs, 1965; Horwitz, 1990). A substantial body of drug market research, particularly that regarding drug dealers trafficking large amounts of illicit drugs and those that sell to unknown others without prior introduction (i.e., in 'open' markets; Hough & Natarajan, 1995), has demonstrated that some drug dealers rely on violent forms of social control to prevent these unwanted behaviours among their associates and customers (see e.g., Fagan & Chin, 1990; Goldstein, 1985; Jacobs, 1999; O'Mahoney, 1997; Spencer, 1995).

Recent research, however, has highlighted that many drug sellers are reluctant to use violent forms of social control to address these unwanted behaviours among their customers and associates (see e.g., Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013; Jacques & Wright, 2008, 2015; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Taylor & Potter, 2013). This reluctance has been argued to stem from fear that violence may attract police attention (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001, 2003; Taylor & Potter, 2013), increase the likelihood of violent retaliation (Jacques & Wright, 2015), or reduce sellers' current or potential customers by killing them or by frightening them away (Coomber, 2010). Extant research has also suggested that some drug dealers may be reluctant to use violent social control because they are culturally uncomfortable with and unaccustomed to its use (Coomber, 2006; Johnson, Golub, & Dunlap, 2000; see also, Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011) or because they anticipate censure from friends and family (Jacques & Wright, 2015).

Dealers that are averse to using violent forms of social control oftentimes simply avoid customers that have committed or whom are thought likely to commit actions that may direct police attention at dealers or provide them with incriminating evidence of dealers' crimes (see e.g., Adler, 1993; Jacobs, 1996). When conceptualized as social control, avoidance refers to the curtailment of interaction with other individuals in response to their deviant, or unwanted, behaviour (see Black, 1998; Horwitz, 1990). By avoiding customers such as these, drug dealers remove their capacity to behave imprudently when setting up and conducting future transactions. They also limit their ability to gather further information about the dealers' crimes that could potentially be traded to police in exchange for leniency. Although avoiding these customers may remove or reduce the likelihood they may purposively or inadvertently increase the likelihood dealers with be identified and arrested by police, it also eliminates potential sources of revenue from dealers as well.

Dealers that do not wish to hazard losing profit by avoiding their customers can also attempt to prevent them from committing these unwanted behaviours with non-violent threats and promises. As social control, threats and promises are defined as statements and/or actions made by a source to a target that are intended to coerce or persuade the target to commit or avoid a specific act or range of acts. Threats coerce through implications of punishment; promises persuade through implications of reward (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Lindskold, 1972, p. 293). Both can be communicated explicitly or implicitly. When explicit, sources directly state how they want targets to behave and the outcome for compliance. When implicit, sources do not outright state this but instead use verbal or nonverbal means to imply their wishes and the potential outcomes (Tedeschi, Bonoma, & Schlenker, 1972, p. 348; Tedeschi, Schlenker et al., 1972).

For instance, extant research has demonstrated that sometimes drug dealers attempt to prevent their customers from behaving carelessly or from providing information to police by simply threatening to cease selling them drugs instead of outright avoiding them (see e.g., Hoffer, 2006, p. 74; Williams, 1989, p. 15). Dealers in friendship markets, or markets wherein dealers only distribute to self-described 'friends,' sometimes also implicitly threaten to end their social relationships with customers if they provide information to police (see e.g., Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013; Taylor & Potter, 2013). Some dealers also use rewards and implicit promises of continuing these rewards to persuade customers to not provide information to police if arrested (see e.g., Goffman, 2014, p. 45; Hoffer, 2006, p. 82). What has been less explored, however, is drug dealers' own views of how these threats and promises influence their perceptions of risk. The present article addresses this lacuna by exploring how and why a group of active drug dealers from St. Louis, Missouri, USA use these forms of social control to influence the behaviour of their customers.

Methods

The present study is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with 33 individuals engaged in the sale of illicit drugs in and around St. Louis, Missouri. These individuals were located and recruited from school and employment-based social networks from January, 2012 to July, 2012 using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (see Wright, Decker, Redfern, & Smith, 1992). To be included in the study, the informants had to either be currently selling illegal drugs at the time of data collection (n = 31) or to have done so sometime in the year prior (n = 2). The informants received $50 for their participation in the study.

The majority of the informants were male (n = 29). Twenty-seven of them were white. Of the remaining six, three were black, two were white/Latino, and one was Chinese-American. The youngest dealer was 19 years-old; the oldest was 41. Their mean age was 28.6. Four of the dealers had graduated college and sixteen others had either attended or were currently attending. Another