**Student transitions into drug supply: Exploring the University as a ‘Risk Environment’.**

**Abstract**

Drug use, like much criminality, is often explored with regard to the journey into adulthood. Though young people are understood to commonly ‘grow out’ of crime, protracted transitions from adolescence into adulthood (Aldridge, 2011) have brought about a new developmental phase where many young people are freer to engage in drug related leisure and other forms of subterranean play in a period of extended adolescence. In this article, we look to this phase with focus upon those engaged in full time higher education and explore the extent to which entry to this new, unique environment can enable particular changes in students’ level of involvement in recreational drug use and supply. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews undertaken with university students in South West England, this article seeks to explore the ways in which the structural circumstances of the university environment can produce favourable conditions for ‘turning points’, where university students transition regular drug use into ‘social supply’. It is argued that the university can be understood as a specific ‘risk environment’ where certain cultural and environmental attributes including financial insecurity, distance from guardians and the interconnected nature of the populace can provide facilitative conditions for transitions into drug supply.

**Keywords:** Drug supply; drug dealing; life course; social supply; transition; turning point; higher education

**Introduction**

Analysis of the relationship between crime, place and space has formed an important yet comparatively underdeveloped aspect of the criminological research agenda since the early twentieth century (Bottoms, 2007). The Chicago School’s ethnographic mapping of offender residences created a space for a criminology that emphasized the social-structural and cultural conditions of neighbourhoods defined by juvenile delinquency (ibid). Though places of crime have become a central concern for crime prevention scholars who have analysed factors such as crime concentration, patterns and target selection in particular micro-spaces, far less attention has been paid to the sociological features of this relationship first pioneered by the Chicago tradition. Context is important, and while action is volitional, an increasing number of studies now acknowledge the broader constraining or facilitative structures on human action (e.g. Fleetwood, 2016). Yet in criminology, less is known about how specific micro-contexts materially impact or transform ‘local’ interactions (Murdoch 1997: 329-332). In focusing on journeys into crime or the shift from the ‘conventional’ to the ‘criminal’, scholars have drawn upon the concept of ‘drift’ (Matza, 1964; Sykes and Matza, 1957) to explain how youth could effectively move in and out of delinquency, experiencing episodic release from ‘moral restraint’ (p.64) and embracing ‘subterranean values’ synonymous with spontaneity, enjoyment and excitement (Matza and Sykes, 1961). This theoretical framework has since been harnessed to deconstruct the fluid movements from drug use into so-called ‘social supply’ (Murphy et al., 2004) – the practice of sharing or distributing drugs to friends or acquaintances for little or no profit (see xxxxxxx). Employing this theoretical vehicle has afforded fruitful discussion of micro decision-making processes, but has tended to do so around the axiom that delinquency is willed behaviour and subject to a sharp diminution with the onset of adulthood (our emphasis Downes and Rock, 2003: 148). In this paper, in understanding the journey from drug use into social supply, we emphasise the importance of the particular setting or background as a distinct structural or cultural ‘environment’ that frames and situates human behaviour (Duff, 2007; 2011). Presenting the university as a specific ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002), we explicate the ways in which the experience of *being* a student can be understood as a meaningful stage in the life course and one that can work to accelerate trajectories from drug experimentation, to more involved drug use, into social supply. We postulate that while students exhibit evidence of ‘drifting’ into social supply by virtue of managing their own drug use (see Murphy et al., 1990; Taylor and Potter, 2013), it is the interaction of the important structural conditions of the university context that can engender a meaningful moment or ‘turning point’ in the life-course for movement into drug supply. With an estimated 2.28 million students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions in 2015/16 (Universities UK, 2017), these findings not only have implications for identifying an important environment for drug related transitions, they also throw up questions concerning the suitability of current drug supply sentencing frameworks, which effectively class the activity of many of these students as ‘drug dealing’.

**Crime, Transitions and the Life-Course**

In seeking to understand patterns of continuity and change in offending behaviour, developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) locate how changes to the individuals and their life circumstances can affect onset and desistence from criminality (France and Homel, 2008). Gaining prominence in the 1980’s (Blumstein et al 1986), both developmental and life course criminology (DLC) emerged as a response to a largely atheoretical criminal career paradigm, attempting to provide conceptual grounding through observing individual changes in delinquency over time (Farrington 2003). General findings from DLC analysis of crime through the life-course have popularly seen individual crime rates increase rapidly in early adolescence (Moffitt 1997) whilst declining from the age of 25 and continuing to fall indefinitely into old age (Farrington, 2003). Significantly, explanations for such patterns have drawn heavily on Hirschi’s (1969) control theory and concepts of attachment, involvement and social bonds, postulating a reduction in deviance as resulting from age-graded social control (Laub and Sampson 1993). Here, differing structures such as education, class and reciprocal relationships, as well as moves into marriage (see King et al., 2007) and parenting (Aldridge et al. 2011) are suggested to constrain the propensity to offend, effectively locking individuals into conformity (Forrest and Hay, 2011). Utilising life course conceptualisations and the etiological principles of control theory (Warr, 1998), DLC perspectives allow a focus on the effects of life events and life *transitions* on offending behaviour (Farrington, 2003) whilst considering appropriate risk factors and controls on such offending (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Transitions can thus be seen as discrete changes in status, with embedded consequences (George, 2003) in relation to offending behaviours, prevalence and desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993). While transitions refer to changes in ‘stages or roles’ the concept of ‘turning points’ (Rutter, 1996) elicits something perceived as more long lasting, acting as ‘hooks’ or catalysts for long term behaviour change (Laub and Sampson, 2003:279). Therefore, the transition to employment may be a turning point if it makes the individual desist from offending, but if it does not, it is merely a transition (Rutter, 1996; Laub and Sampson, 2003).

**Journeys into Adulthood and Drug Pathways.**

The concept of turning points represents an area of growing interest among substance abuse researchers (Hser et al., 2007), but has tended to be more concerned with trajectories spanning addiction and recovery (Teruya and Hser, 2010). Variations in drug use across early adulthood are however symptomatic of broader patterns of lifestyle and consumption (Jones and Martin, 1997) and recreational drug using decisions and journeys can be meaningfully explored through the deployment of these frameworks. In ‘*Changing lives, Changing Drug Journeys’* for example Williams (2013) utilises a longitudinal methodology to show how social relationships and transitions into adulthood can accelerate or limit drug use. Here, Williams provides examples of how the breakdown of romantic partnership curtailed one respondents’ drug taking, but later a new relationship with a cocaine user facilitated regular use of the drug (p87). In focussing on transitions in relation to drug use and supply, research shows the onset of age normatively have a broad association with desistance and moderation of drug use (Forrest and Hay, 2011). Despite this, an emerging trend can be identified whereby ‘protracted transitions’ and ‘delayed adult lifestyle markers’ (Aldridge et al, 2011:186) can be conducive to the continuation of drug use into adulthood. As Shiner (2009) notes, in the 1950’s and 60’s ‘youth’ was strongly associated with the teenage years, but this period is now considered to extend into the mid-twenties. With the length of engagement in full time education substantially lengthened, and entry into further and higher education increasing, this has phase has been related as unique period in which attachment to adult institutions are weakened and reciprocal relationships with friends and acquaintances become fortified (see Warr, 1993). Given that young peoples’ drug use is strongly associated with the level of drug use among their peers (see Järvinen and Østergaard, 2011), the university context presents a landscape in which students are able to gain access to new and wider friendship circles, are provided with exposure to new and accepted behavioural mores, whilst at the same time experiencing a relative release from moralistic value systems and parental supervision (Aldridge et al., 2011; Blum et al., 1972). Young’s (1971) influential concept of ‘subterranean play’ is useful here, elucidating the ways in which values such as hedonism, spontaneity and the search for new experiences can be realised through ‘play’, and occur when man ‘steps out of the workday world, beyond the limitations of economic reality as we know it’ (p.152). The protracted transition into adulthood therefore creates further space for hedonistic pursuits such as drug taking (Shiner, 2009), and the university may be argued as an example par excellence of a site in which this ‘play’ might be enacted.

**Drug Use Contexts: The University as a ‘Risk Environment’**

The notion of ‘context’ is used in the drugs field to refer to a set of broad structural factors such as economic, social and political forces that affect rates and patterns of drug use (see Duff, 2007), and there now exists a comprehensive stock of research literature which analyses how drug use differs from one social context to another, along with and the distinct meanings and values associated with these behaviours (Duff, 2007). The concept of ‘context’ or ‘setting’ is best associated with Zinberg’s (1984) highly influential text ‘*drug, set and setting’* where it is argued that experiences of drug effects are mediated by the combination of the pharmacological qualities of a drug, individual psychology (set), and social context (setting) - the influence of the physical and social setting within which use occurs' (p3). Recent studies have sought to develop this position further by positing that our understanding of context or setting should also include the social and cultural milieu in which the specific incident or situation takes place (Moore, 1993), with a recognition of the embodied practices of groups and individuals in distinct local spaces (Duff, 2007). In a study of drug use at music festivals, Dilkes Frayne (2016) provides a valuable example of the ways spatial, material, temporal and affective dynamics of drug use settings can be captured by empirical research. Here, acknowledgement of socio-spatial relations elucidates the ways in which the micro-site of the festival and campsite environment ‘mediate drug use, drug knowledge, use norms, informal harm reduction practices, access to and exchange of drugs, and rest and recovery following drug use’ (p3). The festival, in many ways, could be understood as a unique ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002), for specific kinds of drug use, or as Rhodes asserts, a ‘situation’ or place in which specific harm is produced *and* reduced (p.88). While Rhodes (2002) utilises the risk environment framework to understand settings and interrelationships that might increase drug related harms for injecting drug users, the model can be applied more broadly through focus on the following dimensions or ‘ideal types’ of environment—physical; social; economic; and policy—and two ideal levels of environmental influence—micro and macro (p.88-89).

In their study exploring student drinking behaviours, Barton and colleagues (2013) contend that the university can be seen as a specific ‘risk environment’ for alcohol related harms in a number of the ways Rhodes (2002) outlines. Direct structural factors such as student accommodation type for example, were found to increase/mitigate drinking levels, with university halls of residence and large shared houses carrying most risk. At a socio-cultural level, students also felt that the university context provided a ‘heavier drinking culture’ compared to non-university contexts, and active, but even tangential, participation in ‘societies and clubs’ was found to be especially risky. In addition to alcohol use, data suggests that nationally and internationally, students are more likely to exhibit higher illicit drug use than the general population (Birch et al. 2001; Johnson et al 2012). According to Bennett (2014), drug involvement amongst non-students peaks between the ages of 18-20 then begins to decline. In contrast, drug use prevalence amongst university students remains stable or ‘continues to increase for a few more years until around age 22, where it too starts to decline’ (1). In a recent study exploring the characteristics and correlates of drug use in seven universities in Wales, Bennett and Holloway (2017) reported cannabis, ecstasy, nitrous oxide and powder cocaine as the most widely used illicit drug across all sites, noting the significant variation in prevalence recorded in different institutions. Though little is known about illegal drug taking among students in further and higher education in the UK (Bennett and Holloway, 2014), there exists a residual curiosity surrounding student drug use (see Daly 2015), and recently there has been a surge of media interest in so-called ‘study drugs’ such as Adderall and Modafil (e.g. Whitehouse, 2016), with reports suggesting students in the US and UK are experimenting with these substances to improve concentration and enhance their academic performance. The emerging research base (e.g. Petersen et al., 2017) therefore suggests that in addition to embodying an environment that encourages ‘subterranean play’ (Young 1971) where students use drugs for pleasure (Duff, 2007), the university environment might also facilitate drug use by generating academic stress (Bennett and Holloway, 2017).

**Student Drug Dealers**

Alongside the emergent literature base, which analyses patterns of illicit drug use in student populations, a small number of qualitative studies have also delved into the worlds of student drug dealers, with insightful results. One early study undertaken by Blum and Associates (1972) focused on college ‘dorms’ as a setting for drug supply activity, highlighting the propensity for drug users to undertake ‘social dealing’ - violating supply laws by sharing drugs with friends. In contrast to common-sense understandings of professional, profit motivated drug dealing, Blum notes the complexity of motivation and supply entry, conceiving drug supply not only as an ’evolving adjustment to drug using needs’ but as an aid to sociability, and a means for dealers to enjoy experiences which they would not have without drugs (p110). More recently, Mohamed and Fritzvold (2010) described a college dealing scene that could be understood as more instrumental in nature, with Southern Californian college students describing motivations for dealing as tied up with underwriting the costs of both personal drug use and other incidental, pleasurable consumption. Elsewhere, in their ethnography of a suburban high school in Atlanta, Jacques and Wright (2015) pick up similar themes, with students highlighting that dealing ‘was a way to save money’, to ‘offset’ use and ‘to eat free pills’; in this respect, dealing was primarily a ‘money-saving venture as opposed to a money-making one’ (p11). The situation of youth also ensured that impression management was believed to be of great value; involvement in drug dealing was said to offer ‘a place among peers’, with drug sales and sharing transactions boosting social capital and sending out important messages regarding status, namely, that student dealers were ‘cool’, ‘generous’ and ‘socially desirable’. Moving from an American to UK context, despite media interest charting the ‘rise and rise of student drug dealers’ (see Daly, 2014), there is a notable absence of academic research which investigates the worlds of student drug dealers or which explores the university as a context for criminal activity.

**Current Study**

This study aims to fill this gap by offering some initial observations of the nature of drug supply in the university context, with a specific focus on how the university itself can act as a ‘risk environment’ (Rhodes, 2002) in which students transition from drug use into social supply behaviours. In order to outline how the unique structural conditions of the university can provoke entry into drug supply, we first explore how the university represents a space in which the majority of students are freed from the supervision of guardians and thus encounter for the first time the space and freedom to experiment in ‘subterranean play’ (Young, 1971) without fear of reprimand. Next, it is argued that the university can act as a cultural environment that encourages drug *experimentation* and increased drug involvement in relation to frequency and repertoires of use. We suggest that this relative normalisation (Parker et al., 1998; xxxxxx 2015), naturalises drug use and to some extent supply, which, in the absence of established supply routes, is more likely to be taken on by drug users. The paper outlines how these factors, as well as the connectedness of the student population and the realisation of the university as a new space for important socialisation, identity and relationship formation can encourage drug use and symbolic reciprocal supply events. In addition to these social-cultural characteristics, we propose that the specific economic circumstances often associated with ‘being’ a student can lead to cost-cutting strategies such as buying in bulk - allowing respondents to reduce the cost of drugs or acquire ‘free drugs’. It is argued that though cultures of reciprocity and notions of ‘drift’ also have wider relevance to non-student populations, that the university can be considered a specific site for social supply transition where its particular cultural, structural and situational characteristics can work as an enabling context for journeys into drug supply.

**Methods**

The data utilised in this research project is drawn from fieldwork undertaken with undergraduate students studying at Plymouth University in 2013. The fieldwork was primarily concerned with exploring the potential for students to transition from drug

use into drug supply within the university environment. 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who fit the inclusion criteria; this was defined as any student who ‘had experience of receiving illicit drugs from friends or acquaintances, or had themselves supplied drugs to friends or acquaintances’. The majority of the students could be considered ‘non-local’ (n=26), and had travelled from various locations in England to attend the university. Of the four students who were not classed as ‘local’, two students originated from Plymouth and a further two lived a commutable distance from the university. The primary sample population of students were recruited through email advertisements and short lecture presentations where the research was outlined and students were invited to participate through email contact. The respondents’ age ranged from 18-37 and the sample was comprised of a 70% male and 30% female demographic. Though one student self-identified as a ‘mature student’ (aged 37), the remainder of the sample were aged between 18 and 23 years old. Respondents were recruited from a range of subject areas (nursing, sociology, geography, computer science) and stages (undergraduates ranging from first to fourth year). Despite only 13 of the sample identifying as ‘social suppliers’ from the outset of interviews, all of the students that were interviewed had experience of sharing drugs with friends – an act that constitutes supply according to the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971). Ethical approval was gained from the University Ethics Board and normative anonymising and confidentiality measures were employed to protect respondents from harm and identification. As is common with this type of research (see Fry *et al.* 2006), respondents were offered a £10 reciprocity payment for their contribution to the research. Following the transcription process, data was uploaded into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programme (NVivo 9), where codes were generated and resulting themes and typologies created.

**The University as a Site of Wider Drug Transition.**

Importantly, the university context represented a site in which increased access to drugs appeared to be conducive to transitions in use. A small number of individuals, who provided evidence of relatively extensive recreational drug use careers before university, showed no real transition in regard to their drug consumption. However, the majority of the sample presented evidence of the university context representing an important stage of the life-course (Sampson and Laub, 2005), in terms of both their levels of drug consumption, their frequency of use, and the range of substances consumed. University drug transition careers tended to be characterised by initial drug encounters at school, with relatively low levels of cannabis use and a few instances of one off experimentation with cocaine or ecstasy use, to a transition into occasional weekend polydrug use of substances including ecstasy, ketamine, mephedrone, LSD (to a lesser extent) and/or higher frequency use of cannabis. Opportunity theorists (Cohen and Felson, 1979), might see this environment as especially conducive to drug use, with the interaction of routine activity theory’s (RAT) three elements: time, location and absence of effective guardian presenting opportunities for drug taking. Supporting the findings of Bennett and Holloway (2014) - who suggest that students living away from their parents were almost four times more likely to report drug use in the last 12 months than those living with their parents - our students emphasised the importance of their independence and the amount of comparable opportunities available to engage in drug taking, which became part of the university experience:

Well, it’s more widely available and you’re surrounded by more people who have been involved in it in the past. Yeah, it’s kind of like a learning curve, isn’t it, I suppose, so we’re just trying out different things and it’s just ... I don’t know, it seems wrong calling it opportunities but (laughs), that’s kind of the way I see it, it’s just the opportunities have been there since I’ve come to university. And also, I’m more sort of free and independent, I live by myself, so I’m sort of capable of making those decisions.

Dylan (20), MDMA and cannabis user/supplier

Consistent with the findings of Williams (2013), respondents attributed this transition into more involved drug taking as related to their change of living circumstances, specifically, independent living and physical distance from parents or guardians. Felson and Clarke (1998) note that opportunities are concentrated in time and space and ‘dramatic differences are found from one address to another’ (p v). These claims are not inconsistent with the findings of this research where it was found that independence effectively loosened the (age related) social controls, previously imparted on students (Aldridge et al., 2011), influencing drug repertoires and rates of consumption. As Aldridge and colleagues relate, moves in and out of particular social networks or key life relationships may be seen as providing important access to different types of drugs and therefore may have a ‘causal effect’ on drug taking (2011 p.193). The vast majority of students saw their university experience as a time for ‘experimentation’, ‘open-mindedness’, or what Young (1971) would refer to as ‘subterranean play’ prior to beginning their working lives. For many, the university provided an environment in which students described experiencing what might be usefully understood as a ‘turning point’ in relation to their drug use – articulated as notable step up in relation to their involvement in drug taking. In addition to feelings of freedom, this turning point was repeatedly related to interaction with likeminded peers, providing both the context and the opportunities that were compatible with drug use in a way that their home life wasn’t. In addition, our respondents also highlighted the like-mindedness of their peers – a finding well documented in previous research (see Blum et al., 1972; Parker et al. 1998) – and the resulting absence of taboo within what was seen as a relatively normalised (see Parker et al., 1998) arena of use where, in the words of Ben (19, cocaine user/supplier), ‘everyone is doing it’. Emily describes the degree to which drug taking has become part of everyday life:

We’re so casual in our group that drugs have become… You don’t even, like we’ll be on the street walking down the middle of town and we’ll just be chatting about them loud and you don’t even know you’re talking about them, so that’s how casual it is.

Emily (19) cocaine and ecstasy user

Those who showed little sign of transition commonly reported having a long held home peer group who were well integrated in local drug scenes and thus, access and drug connections were well established. Along with this, alternatively, a small number of participants described treating university as a place to ‘straighten out’ or calm their drug use down following a period of increased use in ‘gap years’. As a consequence, our interviewees reported feeling that they had largely experienced the drug scene and they showed a desire to maximise their studies directing their energies into concentrating on their education.

**Access, Networks and Cultures of Reciprocity in the Student Populace.**

Despite initial ‘flirtations’ with social supply at college and first drug use experiences at the age of 15 (range 11-15), respondents’ narratives indicated that the university was by far the most prevalent micro-site for transition into regular social supply. With a higher proportion of drug takers than the general population (Newbury-Birch et al., 2001), and a steady demand for substances (Mohamed and Frizvold, 2010), students described the university as containing a ‘captive population’ of drug takers. Apart from those participants who continued to access drugs outside the university context, *all* participants interviewed reported a marked ease of access in relation to obtaining illicit drugs and without exception confirmed that they had shared drugs with friends – a behaviour that legally is deemed as supply and can be prosecuted as such (Section 5 Misuse of Drugs Act 1985). The frequency of this behaviour was most popularly referred to as occurring ‘most of the time’ and ‘all of the time’. The reason for this heightened availability was associated with increases in drug repertoires, rates of use and involvement in the drug scene, which naturally increased the size of their drug using networks and therefore their opportunities for access. Much like the young drug sellers studied by Jacques and Wright (2015), students were forced to interact with peers which they ‘might not naturally intermingle with’, and at this stage of the life-course, their social networks might therefore be considered as ‘far broader and stronger’ than those that follow (27). Students explained that the new geographical landscape the university was situated in often presented ‘supply problems’ since non-local students had no existing connections, ‘so everyone is looking for dealer’ (Louis, 21, cannabis user/supplier). Once friendships and acquaintanceships began to develop, talk quickly turned to drug use, and as Dan describes, those with access to drugs often became involved in supply to assist less well connected friends:

The first time, probably wouldn’t have been until the second year of university, so about 19 probably and that was because I started taking it more and knew more people that I could get it from. People knew I could get it and would say ‘can you get me some of this’ and I’d say ‘sure’. People asked, that’s all, people asked and it was friends, it wasn’t strangers or anything, so I was more than happy to help. And we were at university so...

Dan (23), cannabis and cocaine user/supplier

These findings are also consistent with wider research that postulates drug use as ‘processural’, that is, related to social setting and the ever-changing nature of social networks that individuals find themselves in (Moore, 1993). With the university very often distancing students from previous drug supply avenues and providing a space for the initiation of new friendships, this data suggests that there is an increasing reliance on these friends or acquaintances for drug access. Acknowledging financial hardship and debt associated with studying, many of the students we interviewed generally remarked of the value of taking on a social supply role in terms of the practice providing a certain amount of back up in times of drug shortage, when access could not be obtained, or when financial capital was low. In this sense, similarly to cultures of alcohol use, student drug using etiquette appeared to command a certain amount of indebtedness, effectively ensuring that individuals could expect a reciprocal drug offer:

Sometimes people don't have money you know so sometimes I'll have a gram of something and my friend or he's got some beers…You know it's very, definitely as a student it's very much a bit of trading especially for different types of drugs as well. So you've got a bit of that, have some weed and we'll swap.

Louis (21), cannabis user/supplier

Thematically, this data is consistent with the work of Dorn and South (1990) and their conceptualisation of ‘mutual societies’, described as friendship networks of user-dealers who support each other and sell or exchange drugs amongst themselves in a reciprocal fashion (p.177). Notions of membership, subculture, responsibility and obligation are particularly relevant here and they interlink and express themselves in complex ways. Foster and Spencer (2013) have highlighted drug and alcohol use as ‘intricately woven into friendship’ (p. 223), presenting opportunities for intimacy that are otherwise difficult to attain in neoliberal societies. While social supply is often understood as ‘friendly business’, centring around expressive notions of reciprocity (see Belackova and Zabransky, 2016), here the unique situation of being a student in a new geographical context meant it could also be usefully understood as an important identity-building exercise which allowed students to establish their place within the social order. Students told us that sharing or supplying drugs to existing friends or acquaintances created meaningful ‘shared experiences’ and feelings of ‘belonging’ (Coomber et al., 2015; Blum et al. 1972) whilst at the same time acting as a kind of ‘social cement’ for new friendships and acquaintanceships (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007).

**Drift into Social Supply: Economies of Scale, ‘Free Drugs’ and ‘Cheap Nights’.**

Traditional understandings of drug dealing often cast it as a ‘career’ in which rational decisions, motivated by the pursuit of profit or power, push individuals into commercial supply (Jacques et al., 2014). While this is sometimes the case, research shows that moves into drug supply can in fact be more nuanced. Matza and Sykes (1961) for instance, argued that most so-called delinquents could be understood as largely law abiding, but due to the situation of youth they were free to ‘drift’ in and out of delinquency through employing ‘techniques of neutralisation’ to enable release from moral restraint. The notion of ‘drift’ can usefully deconstruct the ways in which conventional individuals become susceptible to the draw or appeal of offending (Matza, 1964), and in the drugs field the framework has been drawn upon to understand how cocaine and ecstasy users drift into supply (Murphy et al., 1990; Murphy et al., 2004) or how low-level social suppliers transition into commercially orientated selling practices (Taylor and Potter, 2013). In *‘becoming a cocaine dealer’* Murphy et al. (1990) use the concept of ‘drift’ to identify the ways that users can drift into drug supply, by virtue of solving the ‘problems peculiar to the world of illicit drug use’ (323). Findings here show obvious parallels with the findings of Murphy and colleagues (1990; 2004); acting as a ‘go-between’ (buying on behalf of the group) provided a key mode of entry, or way of ‘drifting’ into social supply for the students. Although those who had previously been particularly active within the drug scene before attending university experienced a less distinguished shift in their drug supply, a high proportion of this sample described *experiencing a notable turning point*, characterised by fairly limited drug use in their adolescence, evolving into isolated incidents of social supply at college, to increased drug use, then gradually becoming known as a source of supply. In the case of the ‘designated buyers’ - individuals who took part in the drugs transaction and bought on behalf of the group - once a student became known as someone who potentially had access to drugs, they swiftly *became* the point of access to drugs (Murphy et al., 1990). Adding to this, the propensity for regular drug users to try and gain the ‘best deal possible’ appeared to be conducive to drift into supply, particularly for cannabis users:

Do I buy off people or do I... or am I little bit clever about the situation, do I get this do I make money myself, make it for free and then everyone... like I'm not pushing hard drugs, I'm selling small bags of weed it's not even good weed.

Charlie (21) cannabis user/supplier

With an awareness of how the costs of smoking cannabis on a regular basis could mount up, getting drugs for free, through ‘sorting’ mates out, enabled university students to continue smoking without a sense of guilt regarding the accumulated costs spent on the drug. Student cannabis users therefore often drifted into supply as a consequence of buying large quantities of drugs, rather than choosing to buy for supply purposes. In this sense, supply can usefully be conceived as a *consequence of the purchase, rather than the motivating intention*. The idea of drifting into supply by virtue of strategies involved in trying to access a criminalised substance (Murphy et al., 1990) was also prevalent for psychoactive drug users. For students who used, cocaine, MDMA and ketamine, it was commonly noted that commercial dealers would only sell in ‘larger quantities’ (i.e. 3.5g or more). Therefore, it was only ‘logical’ to buy on behalf of friends who also wanted to access that drug, as it was deemed too expensive and ‘risky’ to keep all the drugs for themselves. Alternatively, much like the suburban college dealers studied by Jacques and Wright (2015), getting free drugs was a strong motivation for undertaking the risky of sourcing and collecting Class A drugs for friends, and was also viewed as a good way of financing a night out as a student:

Something I drifted into to be honest, if someone asks you to help them out, you help them out don’t you? I kind of didn’t realise early on that if you’re getting some pills for a pound and selling them for a pound fifty, which people are more than happy to pay, then you can get your stuff for free…It was just enough to have free nights because obviously nobody’s got too much money when they’re in their second and third year…

Josh (21), MDMA and cannabis user/supplier

Significantly, supporting the findings of Murphy et al. (1990; 2004), the data suggests that because student use and distribution of recreational drugs was so established and normalised (Parker et al., 1998; Aldridge et al., 2011) for cannabis *and* psychoactive substances, students found it hard to define at what point they began to supply and in this respect, moves from use to supply were not conceived as conscious decisions:

I was student and I was skint, simple as that…I spent all of my student loan on a nice hi-fi and I needed to make some money (laughs). It was financial, I could get it and there was a guy on my course who was dealing and yeah, I was the link to him basically. It wasn’t the fact that I actually went ‘oh I can make some money of this’ and then did it…it was kind of like, I did it and then I realised I could make a profit out of it, if that makes sense?

Khalid (19) cannabis user/supplier

This theme was particularly widespread within the sample, and again provides a strong indication that drift may feature in the transition from user to social supplier of drugs. While notions of drift have wider relevance for understanding moves from drug use into social supply (Murphy et al., 2004; Taylor and Potter, 2013), for our respondents, identifying as ‘skint students’ in a context built around subterranean play (Young 1971) further necessitated money saving strategies that would make personal drug use possible. The central point here is that involvement in social supply as means of gaining free or ‘cheap drugs’ was not *considered ‘a major leap down an unknown road’* but rather, represented ‘a series of short steps down a familiar path’ (our emphasis, Murphy et al. 1990: 325).

**Discussion**

Our research has provided evidence to suggest that the university can be understood as a space for potential ‘turning points’ for long term propensity to supply to occur, and for many, as a key site for transition from illicit drug use into social supply behaviours. While first experiences of social supply were often described as occurring as ‘one off’ events in schools and colleges, respondents widely indicated that transition into regular drug sharing and social supply behaviours had occurred on campus. Data suggests that transitions co-exist with significant changes to respondents’ patterns of drug use, both in terms of the quantities and the number of different substances used. Our findings indicate that the unique context of the university, which includes physical distances from parents and guardians, a culture that encourages experimentation, and a highly interconnected population provides a relatively normalised environment for entry into drug use and social supply. As use of drugs such as cannabis and MDMA became more frequent and normalised (xxxxx 2015), slippage into sharing behaviours (often not considered as supply) became common, and notions of supply consequently became conceived as less taboo. In terms of the process of transition, supporting the findings of Murphy et al (1990), (2004), students clearly exhibited narratives that were consistent with theories of drift (Matza, 1964). Students widely reported that rather than making initial cost-benefit or risk based decisions on whether to become involved in social supply, they often drifted into supply by virtue of strategies to make drug use more affordable, or through maximising ‘economies of scale’. While these micro-processes, bound up with facilitating drug use are important, data suggests that these practices are further accelerated by the unique wider structural characteristic of the university space. In many cases the physical proximity from previous established supply routes and the interconnectivity of the student population (Jacques and Wright 2014) encouraged student intermingling and communication focussed on securing supply. These factors appeared to increase students’ propensity to take supply on, or become known as a drug source by others, who would then request access. Although literature shows that cultures of reciprocity (e.g. Dorn et al., 1990; Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) exist more widely within drug using social groups, our research suggests that the reliance on new friendship networks at university may also work as a ‘promoter’ for social supply behaviours as students engage in identity building behaviours and look to forge new friendships in a new social space. Rather than drifting into a more organised and commercial form of supply, students instead used supply as a way of funding ‘subterranean play’ (Young, 1971). The structural conditions of the university context were understood as important here, and supporting wider research (Jacques and Wright, 2014; Dorn et al. 1972; Mohamed and Fritzvold, 2010), respondents stressed the financial burden of being a student, with supply being used in the first instance to *make drug use economically possible* rather than embodying a profit-motivated pursuit.

**Conclusion**

There has been a gap in the UK literature base that focuses both on student drug use (Holloway and Bennett, 2017) and drug supply networks. While various studies have highlighted an increased prevalence for more frequent drug use in university settings (Newbury-Birch et al., 2001; Bennett and Holloway., 2014), there is little qualitative research that provides meaningful insight into drug supply networks inside UK universities. This research has aimed to fill this gap and to undertake initial exploratory work in the university context, analysing the transition in which drug users move from drug use into the more serious offence of supply. While our sample size is small and it is recognised that universities are unique in terms of their location, students’ demographic, and cultures of drug use (Bennett and Holloway, 2017), echoing US studies (Blum et al., 1972; Jacques and Wright, 2014; Mohamed and Fritzvold, 2010), this research posits that higher education settings such as the college or university can provide the right structural conditions for otherwise non-criminal populations to shift from drug use into drug supply. Drawing on the life-course tradition, with particular focus on notions of ‘transitions’ and ‘turning points’, findings here demonstrate how particular moments in the life course (i.e. going to university) can present the freedom, opportunities, relationships and cultural environment that can enable offending. Further research undertaken at other Higher Education Institutions will be essential in exploring how far the university can be seen as a national, or even international site for drug supply transition. While this research does not advocate that all students will drift into supply and in fact shows the university can be understood by students as a turning point where they limit their drug taking, with all respondents engaging in sharing behaviours, it does provide further support for the increasing normalisation of social supply behaviours in drug using populations (xxxxxx, 2015). If the university acts as a micro-site which is enabling of a transition or a ‘turning point’ for social supply, this provides further indication that a large section of society could be considered increasingly vulnerable to being caught up as ‘drug suppliers’ in legislation arguably not designed for them in the first place (see Police Foundation, 2000).

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