

## **Earning a Score: An Exploration of the Nature and Roles of Heroin and Crack Cocaine User-Dealers**

Research consistently shows a strong correlation between heroin/crack cocaine use, acquisitive crime and income generation, through activities such as sex work and theft. Less is known however about alternative choices of income generation such as small-scale drug supply. Drawing on data from interviews with 30 heroin and crack cocaine user-dealers in a city in South West England, this article explores the motivations, practices and roles undertaken by small-scale addicted suppliers who distribute drugs to other addicted users for the purpose of reproducing their own supply. Findings suggest that addicted user-dealers' motivations are commonly different to those of commercially motivated suppliers, whilst their activities are perceived as a less harmful and a more convenient way of funding their drug dependency than other acquisitive crimes.

**Keywords:** Drug Dealers, Drug supply, Heroin markets, Addiction, Social supply, Problem drug users

### **Background**

#### **Setting: The Shape of Drug Markets**

Although the structure of drug markets has traditionally and stereotypically been posited as hierarchical (Paoli, 2002; Lewis, 1994), localised research has for some time now been showing them as increasingly 'dynamic, shifting, changing, and diverse' (Coomber, 2007:750). Further, they are considered to vary in meaningful ways according to characteristics such as the socioeconomic background, gender and age of both those who supply and purchase drugs (Bean, 2008; Coomber and Turnbull, 2007), the cultural context of the market and the drug-using scene it supplies (Taylor and Potter, 2013), as well as the physical place or setting in which exchange takes place (Tarkhanyen, 2013). These characteristics can affect the nature of any drug transaction milieu in important ways such as the amount of violence present in a drug market, the complexion of seller-buyer interrelations and the risks pertaining to both. The arrangements of how illicit drugs are supplied are also important. Although so-called 'open' drug markets are now much diminished in the UK (but none-the-less persist to varying degrees in parts of the US, Portugal, the

Netherlands and numerous other countries) (*cf* Jacques et al., 2014; Connolly and Donovan, 2008), their structure serves to highlight important distinctions between the 'closed' markets that now predominate. Because open markets are 'open' in both the transactional and spatial sense, they have often been depicted as 'street' markets where sellers are reasonably visible to those seeking drugs, or in the most obvious of examples, where sellers openly offer drugs to most passers-by (May and Hough, 2004). There are thus few barriers to access and drugs are available to anyone who appears a plausible buyer (Hough and Natarajan, 2000; Jacobs, 1999). Being readily available as a seller and to potential buyers is however widely understood to often come at a price, namely in relation to increased visibility to law enforcement and the possibility of arrest, as well as increased exposure to violent episodes (Coomber and Moyle, 2012; May and Hough, 2004).

In contrast to open markets, closed drug markets do not inhabit space in quite the way that static street markets do, as both the transactions and the spaces in which they take place, are effectively restricted or closed. Drug transactions are arranged to take place either in 'safe' places, such as the seller's home, or a relatively less visible space found from which to sell from (e.g. a user's home that is 'rented' as a space to make sales from) (see Coomber and Moyle, 2012). Drug supply has also been widely suggested as being reshaped by ubiquitous mobile phone technology (Barendregt et al., 2006). The use of mobile phones have allowed transactions to be arranged to take place in public spaces that vary from sale to sale, alleviating the need for trading 'hot-spots' (Coomber et al., 2014) and reducing the risk of arrest or rival attention (Hough and Natarajan, 2000). In addition, sales are popularly characterised as taking place between buyers and sellers that 'know' and/or trust each other, often by virtue of a recommendation from a known associate (McSweeney et al., 2008; Hough and Natarajan, 2000). Closed markets thus offer both seller and buyer protection and, as we shall see, benefits that are manifest, depending on the type of involvement, to a greater or lesser degree.

Although the predominant method of accessing 'street' drugs in the UK continues to be from sellers known to users (Coomber and Moyle, 2012 and Coomber et al., 2014), it is none-the-less the case that purchases of controlled drugs via the space of the 'Deep Web' (Van Hout and Bingham, 2013;) provide what is perhaps the epitome of a closed market structure. Offering (almost) total anonymity to buyer and

seller from the police and each other (Barratt, 2012), as well as purchase protection features to both through escrow type transaction, the supply of drugs such as heroin through online routes will likely increase exponentially. Current obstacles – particularly for addicted heroin and crack cocaine users, but also for younger recreational users – relate to the relative complexity involved in accessing the deep web and setting up anonymised accounts, using difficult to trace bit-coin currency as well as, for many, having good enough, safe and reliable access to the technology that enables it (Coomber et al., 2014). Most users however still access drugs through traditional routes and as such, our focus in this research has maintained that focus.

### **Drug Market Players: Distributor Types**

In addition to markets often being characterised through notions of space, those operating within them have often been characterised by their activities and roles. Wholesale distribution for example - a mode of supply noted by a number of commentators (Curtis and Wendel, 2000; Pearson and Hobbs, 2001; Lewis, 1994) - has been suggested to denote the bulk sale of substances at an international, national, or local level (McSweeney et al., 2008). There has also been some limited research attention around the 'middle market', focussing on individuals or organisations who are located in-between importers and retail level suppliers (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). The distributors thought to undertake these higher level supply activities have been identified as including 'criminal diversifiers' – described as existing criminal firms capitalising on lucrative opportunities in the drugs markets (Dorn and South, 1990). Accompanying criminal diversifiers, 'drug entrepreneurs' (Desroches, 2007; Lewis, 1994) have been suggested to have become involved in supply as legitimate or illegitimate (Lewis, 1994) opportunistic sideliners (Dorn and South, 1990). These groups may plausibly be considered as sharing a commonality due to their involvement in supply being heavily based on the aim *to gain profit*. The individuals partaking in these positions have thus been described as *rational actors* who focus on financial yield, therefore seeking out economic opportunities and taking into consideration the competition, expenditure and attendant risk (Desroches, 2007). Research focus on lower-level distributors reveals more complex and nuanced rationales for involvement. Retail level distributors of heroin/crack cocaine are often depicted to also be addicted drug users (Lewis, 1994), whereas higher level actors are presented invariably as non-users (Desroches, 2007; May and Hough, 2004).

Despite commentators pointing to the under researched nature of upper level drug trafficking (Coomber, 2007), there is also arguably a paucity of in-depth exploration of low-level supply roles (Coomber, 2004), which provide detail on the motivations, selling styles and culpability of addicted user-dealers.

### **Getting High from Supply? The Relationship Between Drugs and Acquisitive Crime**

The debate around the nature of the addicted state is a highly, and long contested one (Hammersley and Reid, 2004; West and Brown, 2013; Reinerman, 2005). However, regardless of whether it is understood through a biochemical, genetic or social gaze (or a complex interplay of all these factors), the literature has long pondered over the correlation between drug addiction and a much enhanced propensity for many 'addicts' to commit crime in order to fund access to the respective drug/s involved (Goldstein, 1985, Seddon, 2006; Bennett and Holloway, 2009; Degenhardt et al., 2009). Largely based on 'problem' drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine, studies have consistently found a marked relationship between problem drug use and crime (French et al., 2000; Bennett and Holloway, 2009; Degenhardt et al., 2005; Briggs, 2012; Curtis et al., 1995; Debeck et al., 2007). One important meta-analysis of the broader drugs-crime literature (Bennett et al., 2008) revealed that the addictive use of these drugs increased the chances of offending by three to four times over non-drug users, whilst between drug users the chances of offending were lowest for those that used recreationally. Goldstein's classic (1985) work on the 'drugs violence nexus' presents a 'tripartite framework' as a basis for understanding the link between drugs, offering economic compulsive, systemic and psychopharmacological links between drug use and crime. Although criticised for issues relating to methodology and reliability (see Stevens, 2011), Goldstein's 'economic compulsive' typology for example, usefully highlights the need for *some* drug users to engage in economically orientated violent crime such as robbery or burglary in an attempt to support costly drug consumption. Goldstein's framework has been found to support research findings from at least several studies (for example see Degenhardt et al., 2005; Briggs, 2012; Debeck et al., 2007), which report injecting drug users engaging in prohibited income generating activities as a means of funding their dependency. An overly deterministic approach to the link between drugs and crime however has been cautioned against (Bean, 2008) and

important challenges to this narrow pharmacologically reductionist framework have emerged from a number of commentators. Seddon (2006) for example, observes that many of those suffering from the worst excesses of addicted drug use are often already poor, excluded, and living on the margins, with few resources with which to fund their addiction. For those already criminally involved it is therefore unsurprising that *increased* criminality is the result. Developing the notion of social context further, Stevens (2011) has similarly related how crime is not always simply a result of the local drug markets, but can also be understood as an active response to social and economic exclusion, and the marginalisation of those who reside there – a finding that resonates strongly with other drug market research (see also Bourgois, 1995; Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Lalander, 2003). Developing this conceptually, Stevens (2011) offers the notion of ‘subterranean structuration’ as a way to make sense of these values, where drug users engage in the pursuit of intoxication and crime in order to establish a life which meets their wish for ‘pleasure, status and meaning’ (p.51). Dealing in heroin/crack therefore can often be about more than simply economic motivation or biochemical compulsion; it is nuanced with issues of culture, lifestyle, self-image and meaning and, as we shall see, strong elements of choice, opportunity and structural constraint.

### **Supporting a Heroin/Crack Cocaine Habit: Grafting, Hustling and Robbing**

It has been suggested that a lack of employable job skills, past criminal histories (Debeck et al., 2007) and a chaotic lifestyle (Briggs, 2012; Lalander, 2003; Stewart, 1987) can be identified as factors influencing substance dependent individuals to engage in income generating behaviours (Debeck et al., 2007). The academic and official literature scoping heroin and acquisitive crime, details a range of illegal acts in which dependent drug users may participate in order to obtain the financial capital required to buy drugs. While findings from the Drugs Treatment Outcomes Research Study (DTORS) suggested burglary, robbery and vehicle thefts to be less prevalent, acquisitive crime (particularly shoplifting and trading in stolen goods) was found to be committed by almost half of the sample in the month prior to interview (Jones et al., 2007). These findings have been supported elsewhere (see Best et al., 2001; Cross et al., 2001 and Bennett and Holloway, 2009), with studies again pointing to the propensity for addicted heroin and crack cocaine users to rely more upon theft and minor property crime as a way to raise funds to support their drug consumption.

Empirical research has also investigated the relationship between sex work and drug use. Here, studies report a strong presence of high risk sexual behaviours (Booth et al., 2000; Inciardi et al., 1993), as well as high frequency sex-for-drug behaviours (Baseman et al., 1999), particularly in relation to crack cocaine (Maher, 1996; Briggs, 2012). Apart from recognisable crimes like theft, burglary and sex work, literature has also focussed on less well known activities problem drug users can employ in order to support their habits. The term 'hustling' largely relates to the unconventional activities that are employed by heroin users to produce narcotic or economic gain (Fields and Walters, 1985), with the concept being widely cited in ethnographic work and biographical accounts (see Burroughs, 1970; Stewart, 1987). Hustling invariably involves users engaging in acts such as begging and 'grafting' - doing licit and illicit deeds for others, notably dealers (Walters, 1985) - as a means of supporting their habit.

Whilst noting these illegitimate income generating activities, it should also be noted that numerous addicts do not commit acquisitive crime. The reasons why - in part - relate to the structural conditions of the particular locale in which user-dealers reside and also evidence that suggests they still make rational choices (see Hart, 2013). In this respect, other options such as reducing their habit (Decorte, 2001), undergoing methadone maintenance treatment (see Best et al., 2001) and saving their money also represent possible (but less researched) ways of funding a habit. Adding to this, although the research literature has contributed important insight into the types of activity in which users may participate to fund their habit, there is little space reserved for the discussion of *why* some users will for example become involved in sex work, while others might beg, and further still may shoplift or supply drugs.

### **What Do We Know About User-Dealing?**

One of the first identifications of user-dealer behaviour is observed by Preble and Casey (1969), who recorded the emergence of 'a juggler who is the seller from whom the average street addict buys, he is always a user' (p.11). Since then, the term has been most widely exercised as a conceptual and actual cross over between networks of dealers who supply *and* use drugs, with profits contributing toward their own use (Fagan, 1989; Potter, 2009; Jacobs, 1999). More recently, the term has become better associated with an individual who 'only sells drugs in order to

*maintain his or her own drug habit'* (our emphasis, Pearson 2007:77). Significantly, this association has provided an important acknowledgement of supply being driven by problematic or compulsive drug use behaviours. As Lewis (1994) highlights;

The user-dealer label is not just a description of drug dealers who are also drug users. *Instead it seems to be applied most usually to the drug user who consumes so many drugs that they need to deal to raise the money to cover their own drug expense*

(our emphasis, as cited in Potter, 2009:58)

User-dealers may therefore be viewed as individuals 'we might understand as users first and dealers second' (Coomber, 2006:141). A review of legal case evidence shows that this distinct mode of supply has also become recognised within the court environment through reference to '*Afonso*' (2004) (EWCA Crim 2342). This guideline case related to an offender who serviced a £150 a day crack cocaine addiction and was identified as representing a particular group of drug-dependent, unemployed users, who became involved in supply 'as one of *limited options* to fund their habit' and as a result, '*could be seen as less culpable than a commercial dealer*' (our emphasis, [EWCA Crim 2342 [3]). A number of organisations have also lobbied for a more proportionate criminal justice response for user-dealers. Release (2009) for example, have argued that addiction can be understood as 'compelling as fear of or pressure or coercion from a third party' (p.46). Although there has been recent acknowledgement of addiction as representing a 'mitigating factor' in the recent implementation of Drug Offences Definitive Guidelines (see Sentencing Council 2012:14), in a recent IDPC (International Drug Policy Consortium) seminar on proportionality, delegates argued that addiction should be formally considered as a 'motivation' that affects the degree of culpability of a given offender (Harris, 2011) within sentencing guidelines. Another theme to arise from the IDPC seminar was a feeling that the Sentencing Council had failed to recognise the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of drug dependency as 'a multifactorial health disorder that often follows the course of relapsing and remitting chronic disease' (2008:2). In this sense, existing drug sentencing guidelines are argued to be disproportionate as they do not position drug dependency as a mitigating health issue, similar to mental health and learning difficulties. Drawing on these ideas, Coomber and Moyle (2013) and Moyle et al. (2013) have offered the concept of

'minimally commercial supply' as a term that encompasses addicted user-dealing and 'social supply' activity. The concept is offered as a way of differentiating between traditional notions of drug supply and non-profit motivated supply that can be reasonably conceived as separate in terms of motivation, intent and culpability.

## **Methods**

The findings outlined in this article are drawn from PhD fieldwork undertaken between September 2012 and January 2013. The research was designed to explore modes of drug supply that appeared to deviate from common understandings of what drug dealing is, exploring both the social supply and user-dealing of illicit drugs. As is common in research exploring hard to reach or 'deviant' populations, respondents were recruited via a snowball sampling method (see Griffiths et al., 1993). Initial research contact with user-dealers was secured through access to trusted local services, with staff advertising the research to service users who were deemed to fit the non-random inclusion criteria. Many of the service users that were interviewed were recruited prior to the interview date, but others were recruited opportunistically on that day, with their applicability to the research assessed by reception staff who had been briefed on the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria was 'any active, or previous users, of crack cocaine or heroin over the age of 18, who had any experience of supplying amounts of these substances to support their habit'. With the specific aim of capturing the motivations and practices of user-dealers, this purposive sampling approach was successful in providing access to this population. Interestingly, this inclusion criteria also captured a crack cocaine user who used this substance recreationally, but saw amphetamine as his drug of addiction and supplied this drug as a means of supporting his habit

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the appropriate research method for this project due to their ability to explore complex social and personal matters in a detailed way, whilst also providing a chance to follow up and probe responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The sample was made up of 20 male and 10 female respondents and age ranged from 19 – 52 (mode 51 years). The sample was comprised, overwhelmingly, of heroin users (50% n=15) and heroin and crack users (40% n=12), but there were a smaller number of crack only (7% n=2) and

amphetamine only users (3% n=1). Four of these users self-classified as abstinent and problem drug use careers were found to span an average of 10 years. While 87% (n=27) of the sample all initially cited heroin as their primary drug of use, it became clear that the respondents could also be understood as 'polydrug' users. This is because the vast majority of the sample also combined their heroin use with occasional to regular stimulant and 'downer' consumption. In order to acquire a picture of the relative scale of user-dealer activity, respondents were questioned regarding the frequency of their supply transactions, the quantity of substance distributed and the relationship between the user-dealer and the receiver the drug. Respondents were also asked about their particular social contexts and rationale for choosing to become involved in this activity over other acquisitive crimes. As is common with this type of research (see Ritter et al., 2003), respondents were offered a £10 reciprocity payment for their contribution to the research. After the transcription process, the data was uploaded into a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software programme (NVivo 9), where codes were generated, and resulting themes and typologies created. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health and Community Research Ethics Committee at Plymouth University prior to onset of the fieldwork process.

## **Findings**

The article will now outline our findings. In order to organise the data, we have split this section into several categories. First of all, the findings chapter will present demographic data and description of user-dealer core characteristics. Having outlined some of the key supply characteristics of our user-dealer sample, it will then offer user-dealer typologies that group some of the principle styles of dealing undertaken by this group. The typologies outlined were generated through thematic analysis of our research data. Similarly to Kluge (2000), however, attributes essentially similar to those already developed in the literature were noted during the analysis of respondent comments (particularly in regard to nominated buying role). As a result, the production of memos and codes during data analysis were considered sufficiently robust to provide appropriate typologies of user-dealer activity. While the typologies are not offered as an exhaustive list of user-dealer supply behaviours, they broadly explicate what are considered to be the key modes of distribution identified in this study. As well as delivering an overview of the scale and

style of these different types of distribution, there is also some wider discussion of common pathways into these roles. Finally, we set out the core themes to emerge from the sample as a whole, including: supply as a way of controlling drug use, user dealing as less harmful and risky than other crimes, addiction and desperation for drugs and 'using' the profit.

### **Doing User-Dealing: Supplier Characteristics**

Previous research has indicated that males have a greater opportunity to purchase drugs compared to females (Storr et al., 2004; Semple et al., 2011) - and with 65% (n=20) of the sample being male compared to 35% (n=10) female, this research presents a gendered sample in line with that. However, while women were moderately underrepresented in this research, supporting Anderson (2005) and Fleetwood (2013), this particular drugs market was not simply a man's world. In fact, the women interviewed described undertaking a number of roles; these ranged from 'nominated buying', to acting as a 'dealer's apprentice' (see below). Though women in many instances described providing important support to male dealers (see Anderson, 2005), they also took advantage of this supposedly gendered economy through selling to other women and taking on risky transactions to protect their partners. The amount of heroin and crack cocaine consumed by user-dealers was characterised by enormous variance. A typical response when questioned regarding how much heroin or crack would be used on a particular day was, 'as much as possible' (Lisa). More precisely, respondents were most likely to use three £10 bags of heroin per day (a bag was prevalently estimated as containing 0.2g), equating to around 0.6g. Respondents who described having more serious or chaotic habits reported using up to an eighth (3.5g) of heroin a day. Addicted crack cocaine users reported using one or two rocks of crack per day. Crack was most commonly valued at £20 per rock, a notably higher price than observed by the Independent Drug Monitoring Unit (IDMU) in 2011 but consistent with other nearby towns/cities in the South West of England (this was perhaps related to the relative preference for heroin in this region – see Coomber et al., 2014). The average age for first user-dealer experience ranged from 17-38, but on average, similarly to the findings of May et al., (2005), respondents were found to be 22 years of age when they first supplied a drug to support their addiction. Suppliers estimated that the average number of customers to whom they supplied was 12. Notably, all respondents described the

*primary substance for supply as the drug they were addicted to.* When questioned regarding their experiences of the proportions of user-dealers within the drug market, respondents were unanimous in stating that user-dealing was rife. Respondents reported the user-dealer group as dominating the heroin and crack cocaine market in their locale (at street level), suggesting that user-dealing represented an activity in which most addicts had participated:

I think most people get involved in supply in some way, even if it's just a case of them seeking out other people [to purchase drugs] for those without contacts. So they could, by going off and scoring for them, they could get some money off them...or...gear...Even if it wasn't a regular thing, they would have picked up the chance to do that...

*Dean (48), crack and heroin user*

This finding supports the conclusions of previous research (see De Beck et al., 2007; Jacobs, 1999; Johnson et al., 1995) which advocate illicit drug sales as one of the most prevalent means of generating an income for purchasing drugs. Of the user-dealer sample, 64% described their customer base as being made up of individuals described as 'acquaintances' or more broadly, other 'known' heroin/crack cocaine users. 36% of respondents described drug receivers as 'friends' and there were no reports of respondents attempting to sell drugs to strangers. Regular custom was most commonly obtained through introductions from existing receivers of drugs.

## **User-Dealer Typologies**

### **'The Dealer's Apprentice'**

The 'dealer's apprentice' refers to a drug user whose journey into supply is a result of a close working relationship with a commercially motivated 'dealer'. This supplier is effectively employed by a commercial dealer, receiving a 'weight' (typically an ounce) of crack cocaine or heroin to sell and in return, gaining financial capital or a 'cut' of the drugs as payment for their supply labour and risk. The distinctive aspect of this mode of supply relates to an arrangement where the commercial dealer will provide an initial quantity of drugs '*on tick*' (on credit) to the 'dealer's apprentice'. This is always based on the proviso that payment for the substance will be returned latterly after sale of the drugs. Largely consistent with Small et al.'s (2013) 'freelancer', the attraction for becoming involved in this mode of supply was

associated with the fact that the 'dealer's apprentice' would not have to *initially* fund the weight of drugs that they would then go on to sell. A key theme related to the activity of the 'dealer's apprentice' was the level of control that the dealer who 'lays on' (initially provides drugs for free) has over the user-dealer. Rather than being involved in an independent operation, the 'dealer's apprentice' concept captures the importance of the commercial dealer, and their input in: 1. providing the details of potential buyers, 2. providing instruction in how best to sell and 3. their fundamental position as the owner of the substances the user-dealer sells. Several respondents described a scenario where they were regularly in the debt of their dealer and in this sense, were drawn further into user-dealer supply because of the need to satisfy their drug habit and pay their supplier back:

The initial thing for me you know, was get it laid on, so then you're talking a couple of grams, you know...then you get a bit of trust. You see the thing with heroin is...you set these goals for yourself...so if you lay me on 5 grams you know, and I make this amount of money. And then you sit down with the dealer and he says 'and yeah, when you're selling ten grams you'll be able to pay me back and you'll be able to put your own money in'. But it never gets to there...I've not known a person yet who started off the way I did [selling to keep your own habit going], you know, who's actually managed to achieve that *not* owing the dealer.

*Ed (52), ex-heroin user*

As the narrative suggests, the process of owing a commercial supplier, whilst also being in possession of a large quantity of drugs, can be problematic for the user-dealer. The close proximity to crack or heroin, which is later relayed as a positive aspect of participating in supply, also provides further temptation for the addict to use quantities of heroin or crack that are intended for sale.

### **'The Opportunist'**

The 'opportunist' can be considered as similar to the 'dealer's apprentice', in the sense that they may also acquire a substantial quantity of heroin or crack cocaine for distribution. However, in contrast, this typology differs in the sense that there is not a sustained relationship between the 'opportunist' and the supplier of the substance. Therefore, as a result of this, the supply transaction is largely considered a 'one off' by the individual in question. The 'opportunist' user-dealer was most popularly characterised as someone, who on hearing of a chance to buy a weight of heroin or

crack cocaine, would take this opportunity as an alternative to other illegitimate ways of funding their habit, such as shoplifting, grafting, theft or burglary. This typology also includes users, who on receipt of their prescription of heroin substitutes (such as methadone and Subutex) and other medications (benzodiazepines, notably Diazepam), would periodically supply them to other known users and use this revenue to buy heroin or crack. The opportunist role also encompasses 'giro junkies' (Hammersley and Reid, 2002), suppliers described by respondents as individuals who save up their state benefits in order to buy a larger quantity of drugs and distribute them. Similarly to the 'nominated buyer' (see below), once the 'opportunist' had learned that this supply activity offered a viable way of acquiring their drug of addiction, the data was suggestive of the idea that they may be more likely to partake again, should the opportunity rise:

To be truthful I think I just drifted into it, because like one day, a mate of mine was selling weights and got a large amount of gear and started selling weights and I just started turning it over, do you know what I mean? And on the second time, when I had the money, I'd find someone that I know and I'd work my way up from an eighth to a quarter.

*Tony (43), heroin user*

While many respondents (n=17) described becoming involved in opportunity selling at some stage of their drug use careers, it should also be noted that a few of those interviewed had taken similar opportunities to buy weights, but were unsuccessful in their distribution of the substance. These individuals attributed their relative 'failure' in supply to a lack of know-how and 'experience in drug selling'. Unsuccessful experiences were associated with the difficulties of managing weights, finances and relations with customers; furthermore, these respondents also described struggling with self-restraint when surrounded by large quantities of heroin or crack cocaine.

### **'The Nominated Buyer'**

The 'nominated buyer' earns his/her drugs through purchasing substances on behalf of their social group, or at street level, using their contacts to access drugs for other known heroin or crack cocaine users. The 'nominated buyer' provides a sourcing and collection service, and is therefore rewarded for their contacts, their ability to access desired substances, and above all their risk:

I was someone who made it my business to know as many dealers as possible. So if people came to me and couldn't score, I would know someone who would always have something...So people would come to me and say 'I can't get nothing, can you help me?' and I'd say 'yeah, alright, just give me a sorter' and I'd earn my bit that way...

*Baz (50), crack and heroin user*

Conceptualised elsewhere as 'middling' (see Small et al., 2013; Caulkins et al., 1998), 'nominated buyers' occupied an important role, purchasing on behalf of ill connected users (see Johnson et al., 2000), or on behalf of an acquaintance group. Both 'street level' and 'social nominated buyers' described being given a proportion of the purchased drug as recompense for purchasing on behalf of a particular group or drug user. The *amount* of the substance obtained by the 'nominated buyer' was said to be dependent on the quantity the buyer acquired and the attendant risks involved. One respondent, who purchased an 'eighth' (3.5g) of heroin provided an example of her expected payment as a £10 bag (about 0.2 grams), this would increase to three £10 bags if she sourced a 'quarter' (7.0 grams). Many 'nominated buyers' described initial entry into this mode of supply through being known to friends and acquaintances as a user with good drug connections ('social nominated buyers'). At street level, known users were approached opportunistically, for example, with another known user hoping that they would be able to secure drugs on their behalf ('street level nominated buyers'). The data indicates that once these individuals had engaged in this practice for the first time, they were invariably requested to provide this service again, since they were now recognised as a point of access. Similarly to the cocaine users studied in Murphy et al.'s research (1990), once learning that this buying practice required little extra effort (since they needed to 'score' anyway), 'nominated buyers' were inclined to agree to further requests from known sources, as well as other members of the heroin/crack cocaine community.

Now we have outlined the different ways that user-dealing is carried out, the paper will focus on some of the key themes to emerge in the data for all the user-dealers in our sample. As discussed, the next section will explore common narratives that emerged through thematic analysis. Drawing on the work of Sandberg (2010) and Presser (2009), we believe that it is important to stress that we can never know whether the narratives presented by our respondents are truth accounts and

therefore, we must always treat them with caution. In this respect, within this research we make no claims about the essential validity of the respondents' narratives. In line with Sandberg (2010), we instead note how the stories people tell can help us understand the complex nature of identities, values and cultures (Sandberg, 2010) of addicted user-dealers in South West England, whilst also stressing the strong level of agreement (saturation) between the narratives provided.

## **Core Themes**

### **Accessibility, Supply Familiarity and Control over Drug Use**

The idea that user-dealer supply was conceived as the preferred way of funding an individual's drug habit was an exceptionally popular narrative within the data and was employed by *all* respondents. Despite a minority highlighting what they considered to be the 'high risk' nature of drug supply, the majority of respondents saw the distribution of drugs as an 'easy', and 'convenient' option. In line with the work of Small et al., (2013), respondents all commented on the attractiveness of always having drugs available to them. In this respect, drug supply symbolised an income generating activity that offered the apparent ability for them to 'control their habit', a feature that was not associated with acquisitive crimes. Involvement in shoplifting, sex work, grafting, burglary and begging, was in most cases side-lined for supply opportunities. Theft, for example, a common means of generating income (Debeck et al., 2007; Degenhardt et al., 2005; Bennett and Holloway, 2009), was perceived by almost all respondents as less appealing than participating in supply, due to practical issues that came hand in hand with addiction:

You have got more control over your security than if you went an' robbed someone...there are probably more guarantees as well, if you go out stealing then there's a lot of work involved, you've got to pass on what you sell or what you've sold and then the money from that will go....But as I say, if you're ill (withdrawing from heroin), that takes time and you've got a period of being ill before you can get things sorted, whereas if you're supplying you've got the drugs there so you can just go and pick them up, so you're well and can be supplying other people. That's probably the biggest aspect of control, controlling your addiction that was and controlling your well-being that way.

*Ed (52), ex-heroin user*

Significantly, such sentiments were echoed by the remainder of the sample, where there was consistent emphasis on the 'hard work' involved in shoplifting. Respondents highlighted the extra 'hassle' of selling on stolen goods, where the process would require them to take part in various meetings and transactions before they were able to obtain their drugs. In contrast, consistent with the findings of Small et al. (2013), accessing drugs through supply allowed respondents to avoid opiate withdrawal through being able to immediately obtain heroin, or by setting aside precautionary quantities for later use.

The idea of small-scale supply representing a more convenient option than theft also relates directly to an idea relayed by the majority of user-dealers: *that involvement in user-dealing at a low level does not change a user-dealer's routine*. Supporting the findings of Dunlap et al., (2010), respondents commonly described growing up in an environment where drug supply is considered a relatively normal part of life in their community, and a common way to fund addiction. This background very often contributed to user-dealers conceiving drug supply as a feasible and unproblematic act:

Initially it felt risky, but then when I knew who I was selling to, it was just an everyday thing really, it was just routine, it was just everyday life. As normal as having a cup of tea, just another item on the agenda of your daily routine I suppose

*Ryan (34), heroin and crack user*

In contrast to the efforts and risk associated with other acquisitive crimes, many user-dealers described how they would go out with the aim of purchasing drugs two or three times a day. Through their own participation in buying drugs as a drug user, user-dealers had already established a range of contacts and acquaintances. These individuals were described as providing a reliable and convenient customer base, many of whom the user-dealer would have already participated in group buys with, or had some level of acquaintanceship. For the majority of respondents, small-scale user-dealing was therefore often suggested as being no more serious than using. Respondents reasoned that selling drugs felt normal, familiar and in many ways, less criminogenic (dishonest and/or aggressive) than their other *perceived* options for funding their habit - namely shoplifting and burglary. Drawing on a neutralisation perspective (Sykes and Matza, 1957), this finding may be viewed by some as a

presentation of self, and a way of limiting an offenders' self-blame and deviance (Sykes and Matza, 1957). While a small number of respondents (n=2) still found supply to be a risky, uncomfortable act, small-scale supply (nominated buying/opportunistic buying) was widely conceived by respondents as an *extension of heroin or crack cocaine users' consumption*, an activity implicit in heroin use and an 'obvious way' financing a drugs habit.

### **User-Dealing as Less Harmful and Risky**

As well as representing a more convenient means of funding a drugs habit, several respondents indicated avoiding acquisitive crimes and choosing drug supply, since they had a *moral objection* to committing crimes such as theft and robbery. When this theme arose in interviews, it was very often followed with resolute narrative from the respondent, distancing themselves from stigmatising notions of what it meant to be a heroin or crack cocaine user (see Lloyd, 2013). Several respondents claimed that rather than engage in what they conceived to be immoral, visible and aggressive acts, such as shoplifting, theft and burglary, they were able to 'use within their means'. This largely entailed managing their addiction to the point where they would only utilise [their perception of] legitimate funds to finance their habit:

...A lot of people will just go and rob a house innit, know what I mean? But I didn't want to do that, you know? So when I worked I would pay for it myself and...I'm not that kind of person, I couldn't rob...I'm sort of like a *junkie with a conscience* but I dealt a little bit, I didn't want to get involved [in theft and robbery], because I've been around my girlfriend's at Christmas and people have come around trying to sell stolen Christmas presents. To me that wasn't right, I shouldn't have been in this game really. People will do anything to get some gear, literally anything, and I couldn't...

*Harry (48), ex-heroin user*

Complementing the work of Decorte (2001), who describes rituals and rules as key determinants of the drug use self-regulation process, a few respondents described being able to control their drug use through implementing rules based around their moral boundaries. Whilst in the absence of legitimate options, crime was widely conceived to be the *only way* to fund drug dependency, there appeared to be an *element of choice* involved when it came to the particular means of funding it. Indeed, personal rules and moral frameworks seemed to function in order to protect against

involvement in property crime and respondents verbalised avoiding or reducing any other acquisitive criminal activity they might be involved in (see Small et al., 2013; May et al., 2005). It was widely suggested that drug supply was not considered to be 'real crime' in the same way theft, burglary or robbery was and therefore, it was a preferable option. While several respondents described having been involved in acquisitive crime to fund their habit, they highlighted their preference to try to avoid crimes to the person or property as much as possible, since for example, 'they didn't want to hurt anyone' (Frank 47, ex-heroin user). For the women interviewed, supporting recent literature, involvement in drug supply also offered an opportunity to temporarily avoid or reduce their involvement in sex work, and thereby moderate their exposure to the risk of violence and abuse (see Small et al., 2013; Shannon et al., 2008). Reflecting on the harm associated with their user-dealing practices, respondents widely described how vetting processes designed to avoid undercover police enforcement (e.g. only selling to known users and checking for signs of heroin use), along with subcultural rules over appropriate customers (e.g. no children or non-users), functioned to ensure that heroin/crack remained *within* networks of established users.

### **Addiction and Desperation for Drugs**

Although the data suggests that some modes of user-dealing are opportunistic in nature, users often described finding themselves 'sliding' into regular supply. Here, consistent with Simpson (2003), respondents' anxieties surrounding risk of arrest were often outweighed by the desire to buy more heroin or crack cocaine:

It's the sort of thing where its act first and ask questions later, you just do it and after a while you realise what you're doing. You think hang on a minute, bloody hell, if I get nicked for this...but it's too late, you're already doing it, because you've got an addictive nature, because that's your routine, when it gets bigger and bigger and you don't really realise it... But because you get so far into it, it's easier to carry on than to stop, plus there a load of people who are like 'what's happening?' You've clientele, who you know, want to know where you are so you've created a cycle and to stop that would be hassle, it's just hassle...so it's easier to carry on.

*Mikey (42), heroin and crack cocaine user*

Similar to Brookman et al. (2007), respondents also commonly highlighted a need for 'fast cash' and following Bennett and Holloway (2009), this sense of urgency

associated with obtaining drugs, so resolutely articulated by user-dealers (particularly users of heroin), was suggested to be driven more by the desire to 'feel normal' than to get 'high'. A small number of participants (n=3), who used in a less problematic way, were able to control their habit so they would use within their means, whilst the remainder of the sample described adopting supply as the sole means of gaining capital for drugs. Here, respondents related their urgency to obtain the next 'fix', whilst also describing their lifestyle as commensurate with 'living for the drug'. The style of these narratives supports the work of Nettleton et al. (2011), who describe the 'using body' as a 'seized' one, that through addiction becomes relatively 'repetitive, routinised and relentless' (p.347). In this respect, the pursuit to 'score' drugs also represents a habitual action (ibid), described by participants as an 'automatic' reflexive routine that respondents were almost unaware of:

You don't think about it you just do it, because it's your habit you know, you've got to make enough money, because your giro turned up yesterday and you've spent it all and today you're rattling, and you're thinking well I've got to do something so you go along that road....

*Jules (34), heroin user*

There is a risk here to over-emphasise the compulsive and/or transformative power of heroin as did Goldstein in his model. In line with recent research on rationality in addicted crack users (Hart, 2013), despite the urgency involved in obtaining drugs and the prevalence of having the means to fund this in a legitimate way, there appeared to be some rational thought present in the respondents' decision making in regard to *how* they funded their habit. Examples of this include respondents offering evidence of thought processes that evaluated the convenience, ease, risk and harm of participating in user-dealing. However, regardless of the degree of rationality possessed by respondents in relation to their income generating behaviour, the relatively inflexible nature of addiction remained and this was strongly advocated as a barrier against commercially profitable forms of supply:

Not really, no. I wouldn't be able to [stock pile heroin], do you know what I mean? Because of my addictive nature, like I wouldn't be able to have gear there and not be able to touch it. The people that can do that, they're very clever...to have that will power, do you know what I mean?

*Kelly (30), heroin user*

While it was suggested by respondents that there were some known ‘user-dealers’ who were able to use, sell and make some meaningful profit, these suppliers were widely acknowledged to be *recreational users* who were not dependent on the drug. Respondents were keen to emphasise that they saw addiction as the factor that separated them from ‘real’ suppliers. Whilst not condoning their activities, user-dealers highlighted how addiction, the lack of legitimate options available to them and the non-predatory nature of their distribution, provided some form of mitigation for their actions.

### **‘Using’ the Profit**

Arguably, one of the most important themes to emerge through the thematic analysis of this data, was the propensity - regardless of profit levels - for user-dealers to fail to achieve a consistent and *discernible* increase in living standard. This was a finding that was associated with this groups inability to use monetary profit on little else than their drug of addiction, and what were considered as basic human needs. The findings present evidence of profit spanning from a ‘free hit’, ‘smoke’, or up to £700 cash a day, depending on the mode of supply. Further analysis suggests that the average user-dealer (for example ‘the nominated buyer’ or the ‘opportunist’), would be selling around an eighth (3.5g) of heroin (mode), although members of these groups cited selling up to a quarter (7g). Thematic analysis on small-scale user-dealer (‘nominated buyers’/‘opportunists’) profits supported wider literature (see May et al., 2005; Stewart, 1987), highlighting that sellers would retain as much of their drug as possible, and keep a nominal sum of capital. The amount of money kept by the user-dealers was indicated as ranging from £50-£100 a week. However, it is probably best qualitatively understood as representing the sum that would cover the cost of electricity, heating and other commodities required for perceived basic living costs. Consistent with the findings of May et al., (2005), this research indicates that all respondents spent the majority of their earnings on personal drug use:

Out of an eighth I’d probably get half a tenth, sometimes a tenth, I’d always make sure I’d have some cash to put petrol in the car or get some beers or something, so I’d probably get £60, £70...£80 [per week] something like that, and the rest I’d spend it myself, so I’d get £50, £60 and a tenth to use myself.

Steve (36), heroin user

I'd spend all my money on, all of it on drugs, I'd just have enough for electric and a little bit of food that was it, *as long as I got my drugs, I couldn't give a fuck about anything else.*

*Nicky (44)*, heroin and crack user

Interestingly, another key theme to emerge in the data was that after the deduction of respondent's drug use, the difference in financial 'profit' earned between those who sold an eighth (3.5g), compared with those who sold an ounce of heroin, was marginal. The key point being, that in most cases, *regardless of the quantity of the drug sold by the user-dealer*, the strength of a drug habit served to ensure that the only real divergence between these sellers is the amount of heroin they consume and in rare cases, their ability to also be able to buy alcohol, cigarettes and certain commodities, such as TV's or DVD players:

I'd say I broke even really, I was sometimes making quite a bit of money but I'm on my ass again now so...as soon as it comes in on one hand, it's gone out again...I bought clothes and things like that, just basic things for healthy living really. But saying that, if I did have any extra profit after that, it would go towards drugs, everything I had went towards drugs.

*Jimmy (52)*, amphetamine user

Could be an ounce of smack a day...I've gotta be looking at an ounce you know...and I'd be looking at 15-30 people...If I was to have it in pound notes, it's nearly double, once you get up to an ounce of gear, you can literally double your money, so if you're paying £800, you should be able to make 16...So yeah that 6, £700, that *purely* would have gone on my habit...I own nothing, know what I mean? *I own nothing*. I might have a few quid in my wallet to go to the pub to get a few pints, but do you know what I mean, it was literally just funding my habit, that's all it was doing...

*Darren (51)*, heroin user

As the data illustrates, the potential profits available to heroin and crack cocaine sellers are considerable, with sellers widely noting the ability to 'double your money'. For the respondents, the inevitable loss of any possessions gained through supply was an aspect of the narrative that was especially stressed. In this sense, respondents were reluctant to elaborate on their own experience of occasions where commodities could be purchased in addition to drugs. The reason for this appeared to be associated with the insignificance of this small gain in the wider context of their social situation. Data does, however, suggest the *potential* for user-dealers to regulate their use, providing the opportunity to use drugs *and* have some disposable

income to spend on things other than basic living expenses. *In this respect, it is not certain that user-dealers will always be found to be characterised by a lack of material gain.* As highlighted throughout this paper, we must also consider the potential that offenders have some level of awareness of conventional values, that they understand that their offending is wrong, and they self-talk to mitigate the anticipated guilt and shame associated with violating societal norms (Topalli, 2005). Whilst acknowledging this possibility, we emphasise that our findings here strongly indicate that supply was *always* undertaken with the intent to fund drug dependency. Respondents normatively gained only very small amounts of profit; this hardly equated to disposable income, since it was regularly spent on necessities and basic living expenses. If disposable income was secured, this was not a consistent or stable condition, and therefore arguably, financial gain cannot be conceived as meaningful in the same way it can in non-addicted commercial drug dealing populations.

## **Discussion**

Drug dealing (proper) and its perceived harms, have been defined through various academic and legal sources, and have been suggested to be associated with: commercial profit making, large/stock holding quantities, haphazard distribution of the drug, wider criminal involvement and supply over time for gain (Ashworth, 2010; New Zealand Law Commission, 2011; Police Foundation, 2000; Sentencing Council, 2012; Moyle et al., 2013). In this paper we present evidence to suggest that user-dealer supply behaviours are *inconsistent with some of the key harms attributed to drug dealing* (outlined above). Supporting wider research (Dwyer and Moore, 2010; May et al., 2005; Cyster and Rowe, 2006), our findings also strongly indicate that user-dealers can be conceptualised as non-financially profit motivated suppliers, since they are motivated by their substance rather than financial profit - which is almost always 'consumed'. Therefore, irrespective of the potential rewards available, if the user-dealer is physically dependent on the drug they sell, tangible financial profit (and improvement in lifestyle) is *highly unlikely*. While a small number of user-dealers had larger quantities of substances in their possession, these 'apprentices' were working under direction of a profit motivated dealer, who acquired the bulk of the financial profit. Adding to this, rather than employing unscrupulous selling strategies (see Taylor, 2008), user-dealers described involvement in a relatively

closed system of distribution, where they would sell only to friends, acquaintances and known users. Importantly, acts of supply were said to be so well embedded into an addicted drug users routine, that they felt relatively 'normal' and as such, the harm and seriousness associated with them were not considered to be significantly different to using. As a result, similarly to Small et al. (2013), user-dealing was perceived as providing an opportunity to avoid what they considered as more aggressive, visibly and morally shameful crimes such as robbery, theft and sex work – crimes that many respondents had previously engaged with. While addiction featured heavily in respondents' explanatory narratives, in accordance with Dwyer (2009), user-dealers were not found to be totally enslaved to the 'demands' of heroin or crack cocaine. In contrast, whilst citing the desperation and habitual, automated routine (Nettleton et al., 2011) associated with gaining more drugs, user-dealers also demonstrated a level of rationality and a *preference to avoid acts such as person and property crime when possible*. Moving beyond the more limited notion of individual rationality and opportunity guiding drug sellers' behaviour (cf Jacques and Wright, 2011; Jacques, Allen & Wright, 2014), the forms of rationality exhibited by this user-dealer sample were more embedded with social and cultural mores and practices. Consistent with Decorte (2001), who describes rituals and rules as key determinants of the drug use self-regulation process, a few respondents described being able to control their use through implementing rules based around their moral boundaries of what they would and wouldn't do to fund their habit. Offering unique qualitative insight into the rationale for participation in user-dealing, our findings suggest that supply activity is an *attractive and obvious option* for heroin and crack cocaine users. Drug supply was reasoned to be easily incorporated into an addict's lifestyle and preferable, due to offering a drug user closer proximity to their drug and signifying a less problematic action in terms of its wider effects.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study, while based on a small study sample, have implications for public policy and interventions as they provide valuable insight into the reality of user-dealer behaviours, offering an empirical basis for considering culpability and punishment in drug supply offences. While other research has provided consideration of user-dealing activity and subculture, this analysis provides an *inclusive typology* of the various roles user-dealers are suggested to occupy and a

detailed analysis of how it is done. Rather than focussing on the more visible acquisitive crimes commonly connected with drug dependency, this paper offers qualitative insight into the possible motivations for participating in *user-dealing*. In regard to limitations, it should be recognised that this study was conducted among a small non-random sample of drug users in the South West of England, and therefore may not represent the perspectives or experiences of user-dealers participating in local markets elsewhere. In this paper we propose that user-dealing can encompass small-scale ‘nominated buying’ practices and opportunistic supply events, *but also* includes the sale of larger quantities of substance on behalf of a commercial dealer. Arguably, this has important implications for notions of culpability in sentencing, as our data suggests that the higher threshold amounts used within the sentencing guidelines are not necessarily indicative of more predatory or serious modes of dealing and therefore represent an unhelpful way of sentencing drug suppliers (see Moyle et al., 2013; Harris, 2011). Supporting recent academic research and policy evaluation (Moyle et al., 2013; Coomber and Moyle, 2013; Harris, 2011; Lai, 2012) this study suggests that arguably, user-dealers require a more proportionate and tailored sentencing approach, that appropriately acknowledges their distinct social context and their motivations for choosing supply over other acquisitive crimes (Moyle et al., 2013). While the Sentencing Council (2012) have attempted to meaningfully incorporate addiction into their definitive guideline, they have so far only included it as a ‘mitigating factor’ rather than a specific (user-dealer) ‘role’ considered within the culpability scale. As related in the discussion, the evidence presented here indicates that the behaviour of user-dealers tends not to correspond with the harms and aggravating factors widely associated with drug supply. Instead, user-dealing may represent for addicted drug users a practice that is perceived the best choice in a very limited range of options.

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