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Abstract

Early studies of female drug dealers suggest that women are marginalized, passive victims. In contrast, more recent studies describe women as skilful and competent dealers. In a Bourdieu-inspired theoretical framework of 'street capital', we suggest that the truth is somewhere in between. Female dealers can be successful, but they face more obstacles than men do. The illegal hard-drug economy is gendered and favours men. In this paper we discuss how female drug dealers develop particular strategies to prove they still belong in 'the game'. Four such strategies are emphasized: desexualization, violent posture, emotional detachment and service-mindedness. These are common strategies for all drug dealers, but the gendered economy forces female dealers to be particularly careful about their business and self-presentation.

Keywords

Drug dealing, gender, illegal drugs, street capital

Introduction

When you're a woman, they charge you double price – right? 'Cause they know they can do this, since we do not have that same frightening physical appearance. Of course, I can hire a couple of torpedoes to counterbalance this, but those torpedoes also would charge me double price because I'm a woman, so then I'm back at square one again. (Female dealer, 35)

This article examines the role of female drug dealers. An understanding of women as subordinate to men was dominant in the field early on. They were portrayed as victimized and positioned at the periphery of the drug economy, lacking the qualities needed for

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success (Adler, 1993). In more recent research, this view of women as passive victims has been challenged. Denton argued that female dealers 'were not victims and certainly not saints' (Denton, 2001: 4). Many other studies have found that women can be successful drug dealers. They are not marginalized in a male-dominated world; in fact, they may use their 'female attributes' to their advantage.

The drug economy is male dominated. In the absence of special privileges, the key to gaining and holding a position as a dealer is to enact 'masculinity' (Dunlap et al., 1997: 42). For example, most female dealers in this study stressed the importance of being 'one of the guys' (Miller, 2001). They use a particular set of strategies to succeed, most of which involve enacting some kind of 'street masculinity' (Mullins, 2006). Female dealers have to be particularly careful about their image in a drug economy that strongly favours males.

Inspired by Bourdieu's (1990) attempts to find a middle road between agency and structure, we suggest a compromise between the 'old' and the 'new' perspectives on women in the illegal drug economy. Female dealers work in a gendered economy that puts them at a huge disadvantage. At the same time, successfully or unsuccessfully, they develop or exaggerate particular strategies to cope with their marginal position. These are not conscious strategies, but rather what Bourdieu (1990) describes as 'practical rationality'. We will argue that his concepts of capital and habitus are fruitful for describing female dealers' creative strategies and outcomes in a marginal situation.

We start by discussing earlier research on female dealers and argue that none is entirely suitable when studying the complex role of female dealers. What follows is the main purpose of this article. We will present four strategies that female drug dealers use and discuss how the gendered character of the illegal drug economy influences their dealing and their lives more generally. Our data are from 30 interviews with female drug dealers in prison. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger research project that included qualitative interviews with 80 drug dealers. These other interviews are used as a point of comparison.

Female dealers: Marginalized victims or successful entrepreneurs?

Overall, research on women and drug dealing is scarce, but some relatively recent research has dealt with the subject (for example, Anderson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Denton and O'Malley, 1999; Dunlap et al., 1997; Miller, 2001; Morgan and Joe, 1996). In earlier studies of the drug economy, men assumed various roles. Women, in contrast, have traditionally been regarded as passive and helpless victims (Adler, 1993; Maher, 1997; Maher and Daly, 1996; Steffensmeier, 1983). Some researchers have even emphasized the forced entry of women into crime through victimization, through economic marginalization and for survival needs (Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996: 470). Adler (1993) found that women were absent in drug distribution and placed below men in the drug hierarchy. Illustratively, the most 'active' women in her study were employees of male dealers. Moreover, according to Adler, the most common role for a woman was as a sex object – they worked as escorts in the large entourages surrounding male dealers (Adler, 1993: 91).

Similarly, Maher and Daly (1996) described how women are marginalized in the drug culture. They are forced to rely on sex work and earn significantly less than men. Other scholars have highlighted that gender differences are prominent in the illegal drug economy, using the argument that men perceive women as lacking the qualities needed to succeed in the drug-dealing business and therefore prefer not to work with them. Furthermore, women do not have the same physical appearance as men, and this reinforces female dependency on men (Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996). Women are seen as gossip-prone, untrustworthy and emotional, as well as being more likely to succumb to police interrogation pressures (Steffensmeier, 1983: 1014–1015). This means that women often see themselves as others do – lacking the potential to commit such crimes (Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996: 477).

The overall tendency in more recent studies of female drug dealers counters the traditional victim perspective. These studies often describe women's achievements and competence, thus challenging the earlier representations of women as passive and powerless (Anderson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Denton and O'Malley, 1999; Mieczkowski, 1994; Morgan and Joe, 1996). Denton and O'Malley argue that earlier studies of female drug dealers are 'male centred' and present 'narrowly masculinist conclusions about the nature of the operations, resources and skills involved in drug dealing' (Denton and O'Malley, 1999: 514). Anderson suggests a move away from the one-sided focus on 'dysfunction, dependence, exploitation and victimization' (Anderson, 2005: 373). She claims that a 'pathology narrative' has dominated studies of female dealers and suggests an 'empowerment' narrative instead. Anderson finds that women are powerful and competent, but their importance is 'behind the scenes'. She reinterprets 'supporting roles' (for example, cooks, baggers, sex workers) as female competence, which she sees as fundamental to the organization of the illegal drug economy (Anderson, 2005: 376). However, she does not address how, and in which ways, women can be involved in drug dealing.

The Melbourne women studied by Denton (2001) and Denton and O'Malley (1999) illustrate how women can be successful dealers. These authors describe the entrepreneurial roles women take on in some markets and their successes relative to those of their male colleagues. They also suggest that most female drug dealers are competent and skilful operators who choose their lifestyles out of curiosity and for the excitement (Denton, 2001). They conclude that it is crucial not to think of female dealers as 'male drug dealers who happened to be women' (Denton, 2001: 173). Women use their female smartness, including trustworthiness and resourcefulness, to be successful dealers.

Most of Denton's dealers were also lovers, partners and mothers. These women successfully created a home base with the necessary communication facilities to run their business (Denton, 2001: 44), a strategy also found amongst the female crack dealers studied by Wilson (1993). By playing on traditional gender roles, such as being a housewife, it is argued that women have resources particular to their sex if they want to be drug dealers. Some of these are important qualities, because they deflect police attention, and most illegal businesses are interested in operating peacefully. Thus, women are not necessarily disadvantaged if they avoid the use of violence (Denton and O'Malley, 1999: 523). Being a woman can even be an advantage.

The studies mentioned above have quite different social contexts. Denton (2001) for example describes successful female dealers in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, whereas Maher and Daly (1996) studied poor crack dealers in Brooklyn, New York. The social context

of drug markets will vary, and this will influence the role of women. Whereas many small-scale, private and soft-drug markets downplay violence and thereby facilitate female drug dealing (Sandberg, 2012), most hard-drug and public markets are strongly gendered in favour of men (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). However, there are also important similarities, such as the dominance of men and the gendered character of the economy, which makes comparisons across social contexts valuable. In this paper, we study hard-drug female dealers. In contrast to small-scale female cannabis dealers, for example, such women operate in a gendered and often violent economy, which is a huge disadvantage for them. Yet they continually and creatively develop new strategies to overcome their shortcomings.

Women in the hard-drug economy face overwhelming structural constraints, such as being physically weaker and the perception that they are less violent and less trustworthy than men are. In short, they have to cope with a gender role that is the opposite of the traditional view of a drug dealer. Studies of female dealers should acknowledge these constraints, but they should also examine the strategies marginalized actors develop to overcome them. In this study, we suggest that a theoretical framework of *street capital* (Sandberg, 2008a, 2008b; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009) synthesizes, and includes insights from, both the traditional victim approach and the contemporary empowering approach to female drug dealers.

Gendered street capital

Men dominate the importation and distribution of drugs across the world (for example, Bourgois, 2003; Decker and Chapman, 2008; Jacobs, 2000; Mullins, 2006). In Norway, for example, women account for less than 20 percent of people charged with drug-related criminal offences (Statistics Norway, 2009). Men not only dominate most illegal drug markets, they also tend to display a particular form of masculinity when they manoeuvre in the market. Bourgois (2003) describes a street culture that is characterized by both hypermasculinity and hypersexuality. Unfortunately, despite general notions about street culture being 'masculine' or a 'world for men', the complex character of gender in street culture has received little attention so far (but see Mullins, 2006).

Connell (1995) argues that there are several competing types of masculinity. The prevalent masculinity observed in drug dealing is similar to what he describes as *protest masculinity*. Protest masculinity is characterized by violence, school resistance, crime, heavy drug or alcohol use, motorbikes or cars, and short, heterosexual relationships (Connell, 1995). Mullins (2006) describes a similar concept of *street masculinity*, which may be even more appropriate for dealing in hard-drug markets. This understanding of street masculinity rests on an understanding of gender as a practice (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Men in the drug economy regularly display gender through activities that express street masculinity (Mullins, 2006: 7). Street masculinity values smartness, violence, retaliation, fashionable clothes and female attachment. Building a reputation for violence is seen as an integral part of drug dealing – to gain respect, deter attacks and punish people, especially when they have not paid their debts to the dealer. Moreover, displaying a violent attitude is the most common way to 'do gender' and thus be seen as 'a man' (Mullins, 2006: 152).

Street masculinity is most clearly constructed in opposition to 'punks'. The category of punk is linked to both femininity and male homosexuality. Punks are regarded as soft or womanly, 'bitches' or 'fags'. Mullins (2006) describes street masculinity as 'gender

capital', but unfortunately he does not expand on the relationship between gender capital and Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital, other theoretical concepts of capital or its relation to particular social fields. Moreover, when applied to drug dealing, the concept of street masculinity risks exaggerating the gendered nature of the activity.

In this article, competence and skills that have previously been conceptualized as 'streetwise', knowing the 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1990), protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) or street masculinity (Mullins, 2006) are reconceptualized as street capital (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). This concept points to the importance of early socialization and the practical rationality involved when people start dealing illegal drugs. It also develops a middle position between individual agency and structural constraints, which is essential to understand the position of female dealers (Sandberg, 2008a). Drug dealers' street capital can be seen in their technical knowledge of illegal drugs and dealing and in their mythological knowledge of drug symbols and cultures. Knowing how to avoid the police and make good deals, a readiness to use violence and self-presentation as 'gangsters' are crucial (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). As with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), street capital can be converted to economic capital, and it is closely linked to one's social capital. It differs from cultural capital, however, because it is difficult to transfer to other social arenas.

Most importantly, the street capital concept emphasizes street knowledge and competence. *Habitus* is Bourdieu's concept for the practical sense, or 'what is called in sport the "feel for the game"' (Bourdieu, 1998: 25). *Habitus* is a learned and durable system of preferences and practices, produced by historical and social conditions (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Embodied street capital also includes more 'objective' characteristics such as skin colour (Sandberg, 2008a) and sex. Street capital is closely linked to particular ways of 'doing gender' (protest and street masculinity), and it can be described as a gendered form of capital more readily available to men. Women who want to gain street capital must, literally, contradict one of their most fundamental embodied characteristics.

Method

This study is part of a six-year research project interviewing drug dealers. In an ethnographic study of a street cannabis market, we interviewed 20 street drug dealers, including one woman (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). In addition, in a study of private and high-end cannabis markets, we interviewed 20 small-scale dealers and 20 larger-scale dealers and smugglers. Five of the small-scale dealers and one of the smugglers were women (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2010). Following these studies, we wanted to expand our research beyond the cannabis market, and parts of a recent study have been to interview 30 female drug dealers in Norwegian prisons. These interviews are the focus of this article, but previous interviews with female and male drug dealers serve as an important context for interpretation and analysis.

The first author (a woman in her late twenties) conducted the prison interviews with female dealers ranging in age from 20 to 50. The interviews were conducted in small visiting rooms and lasted between one and two hours. Four dealers were interviewed twice. The interviews were semi-structured and organized as 'life stories' (Bertaux, 1981). We started by asking the research participants to talk freely about their lives, but

in every case the informant quickly turned to drug-related stories. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All the dealers we interviewed were involved in hard-drug markets characterized by what Bourgois (2003) describes as street culture. They were positioned at every level of the drug hierarchy and, though they dealt a variety of drugs, amphetamines were the most common.

Using a prison to recruit informants and conduct interviews has several advantages. First, it allows access to a hidden population. Second, imprisonment gives research participants time to reflect upon their lives. Third, informants are likely to be motivated, contemplative and clear-headed. In a more natural context, the informants often have other matters occupying their time, and thus they may be eager to finish interviews quickly (Copes and Hochstetler, 2010). A disadvantage of prison interviews is that research participants are not as close to the events they are recounting, and they can be influenced by the institutional setting (Wright and Decker, 1994).

Strategies of female drug dealers

A female dealer we interviewed was discontented and told us that ‘when you are dealing you cannot be respected as a woman’. She felt she had to choose between being a ‘woman’ in the traditional sense and being a drug dealer. There were two elements to her argument. First, she received no respect as a woman when dealing drugs. Second, she received no respect as a drug dealer if she appeared too womanly. Street capital is crucial to success as a drug dealer, but the dilemma for female dealers is that street capital is in many ways opposed to what being a woman is traditionally about. Below, we describe four strategies female dealers use to compensate for their embodied lack of street capital. The first three strategies – desexualization, violent posture and emotional detachment – are attempts to become ‘one of the guys’. The fourth strategy – service-mindedness – involves rejecting the hardcore masculine ‘rules’ of drug dealing and emphasizes the more gender-neutral role of ‘entrepreneur’ or ‘seller’.

Desexualization

Siri was 35 years old when we met her. She grew up with a mother who used a wide variety of illegal drugs. In her early teens she started stealing cannabis from her mother to sell to other youngsters downtown. She soon befriended some older dealers and was eventually picked up by some of the ‘big guys’ selling hard drugs. She started selling amphetamines and cocaine for them, gradually rising in the drug hierarchy to become a large-scale cocaine dealer. She held an important position in both the importation and distribution of cocaine. ‘We ordered from some of the biggest cocaine smugglers in Europe,’ she told us. In Siri’s opinion, her success as a dealer was possible mainly because of her ability to desexualize herself and be ‘boyish’.

The most common strategy used by the female dealers in this study was desexualization. It was important to avoid sexual and/or personal relationships with men in the drug business. Many female dealers stressed the importance of being single and avoiding one-night stands. ‘From the moment you have sex with one of them, you’re out of the game,’ Siri explained. Another dealer said, ‘As long as you do not get on your back, you are able

to gain more respect,' and a third dealer said, 'You cannot use sex to close a deal, but many women falsely think they can.' Abiding by this restriction became increasingly difficult, however, because the higher in the hierarchy they rose, the more desirable they were to men. Siri explained:

The craving to curb you, to have you as their girlfriend or just to get you in bed, is much bigger when selling cocaine. Because there's status in it, and they are curious about which important people you know and what's in it for them.

When asked about personal relationships, a (high-ranking) dealer similarly emphasized, 'Oh, you cannot have a boyfriend in my position.' The imminent risk of sexualization makes it challenging to uphold one's position as a dealer. There is a constant struggle to avoid being reduced to the status of a (potential) sexual partner. Hence, being *single* and avoiding sexual relations with others in the illegal drug economy are important in order to gain and maintain street capital. This corresponds with Campbell's (1987: 452) findings that gang girls often disapprove of random sexual activity.

Nevertheless, being sexually harassed was an everyday part of life for most of the female dealers we interviewed. They reported frequent and repeated sexual and physical abuse. 'The men keep testing you to check how far they can go,' a dealer related.

Siri's male colleagues and friends would, for example, suddenly test her by ripping off her shirt and touching her breasts. Siri explained that she had to respond in a similar fashion: 'You just have to grab their balls in return.' In this way, she displayed a sexualized way of acting that the men do not normally expect from women. This also involved talking in the same way as men. Siri adopted men's vulgar and sexist language: 'When the guys would brag about being out all night banging girls, I played their game and replied, "Oh, how was that pussy?"' Because she was a woman, she often felt she had to use even rougher language than her male counterparts. Similarly, another dealer stated, 'You need to use bad language to be heard.' They had to overcompensate verbally for not being a man. One drug dealer explained that it was best if her business partners forgot that she was a woman. 'As soon as they no longer see you as a girl, *then* you can be friends with the big guys,' she argued.

Desexualization also involves downplaying all signs of femininity to avoid sexual attention in the first place. One dealer explained, 'What makes me successful is that I'm not about boobs and ass and all that. I never act upon looks and sex . . . I find other ways to get around.' In the same way as gang girls, these dealers questioned the integrity and authenticity of women who used sex as a strategic means (Miller, 2001: 193). Furthermore, Siri told us that she gained weight so that she became less sexually attractive to men: 'I desexualized myself by being overweight, 'cause you know these guys, they have a certain standard for what a woman should look like . . . they usually are skinny, pretty girls with huge boobs and low self-esteem.' This narrative may be a 'rational reconstruction' (Cromwell et al., 1991) in order to positively reinterpret the experience of gaining weight from being an indication of poor will to being one of strong will. It nevertheless illustrates the rationale of street culture and how female dealers need to be particularly conscious about their appearance. It also demonstrates how slenderness is an ideal of female attractiveness (Bordo, 1993), even in the drug economy. Female

dealers are thus not that different from women generally in their understanding of the body as a symbol of gender identity.

Violent posture

Renate was only 22 years old but she had a long history as drug dealer. Before being imprisoned she ran an amphetamine and heroin operation from her house, alone – without the help of men. From the moment she entered the room for the interview she displayed a tough appearance. Right away she began telling stories of how she dealt with people who had not repaid their debts:

He owed me forty grand and refused to pay it back, so I found him on the street and screamed, ‘Where’s my money?’ Then he started to cry and replied, ‘Come on, we’ll get it from the cash machine over there.’ But when I turned the other way, he tried to escape, so I grabbed him, threw him into my car and dragged him into a friend’s house. Then I took some handcuffs and locked him up in the garage. I took a lot of pills, shot amphetamines, and then I took a bat and beat the crap out of him. I kept him there for a week.

Drug dealers face a high risk of being robbed because the people around them, especially buyers and competitors, know they have both money and drugs (Jacobs, 2000). According to Renate, aggressive behaviour was necessary to survive in the drug market. Violence could also be used to balance one’s image as a dealer. Some dealers told us that, if a woman gave in to the temptation of a sexual relationship with a male dealer, being violent could restore her reputation as ‘one of the guys’. One of the most important aspects of street capital is violence (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009), and earlier research suggests that women need to be violent to survive in the hard-drug economy (Dunlap et al., 1997: 44). Renate explained why:

I’ve had no other choice but to be a violent girl to get respect and to get people to understand that they shouldn’t mess with me . . . I’ve had no choice but to show my bad side to prevent people from coming to my house robbing me or beating me to pieces.

For these dealers, the use of violence and maybe more importantly the enactment of a *violent persona*, was a crucial strategy to operating in a male-dominated economy. As Zaitch (2005) emphasizes, it is not so much actual violence as the *threat of violence* that is effective in the illegal drug economy.

One female dealer stated illustratively: ‘I hit people with baseball bats, fighting gloves and various objects . . . I guess I’ve always been pretty tough.’ Another told us that she practised martial arts to acquire the skills she needed to be physically threatening. She said this kept her from being pushed around: ‘I never let myself get bullied. If a man slaps me, I hit him back. One time I beat a man *really* hard in front of a bunch of witnesses. Since then people have respected me.’ Another dealer explained that her violent reputation still clung to her many years after she had last used violence: ‘When I walk downtown I still see drug addicts run away as soon as they get a glimpse of me.’

Renate had a small, slim body and was probably aware that her appearance was not frightening. However, she stressed that using drugs, and being under the influence of

multiple drugs, lowered the threshold for using violence. The female dealers telling stories of violent behaviours all seemed to exaggerate and emphasize their stories in a way that we did not see among male dealers. They were concerned about their violent image too, but both the frequency and the intensity of many of the female dealers' stories about violence were noteworthy. Female drug dealers probably have to compensate for not being men in many ways (Dunlap et al., 1997: 50). Using excessive violence and exaggerating the enactment of a violent persona was important for many, especially among those involved in illegal drug markets embedded in street culture.

Emotional detachment

Maren was 28 years old when we interviewed her, and she had been involved in dealing since she was 16. She stressed the importance of always hiding one's true feelings in front of men. Her most important strategy as a female dealer was to put on a 'poker face' to hide her real emotions. When she was watching a sad movie with other dealers, for example, she would not allow herself to cry:

You put on your poker face. You have to pretend like *nothing* affects you, that nothing makes you sad. You cannot cry when watching a movie. You put your emotions aside – right? This is something you have to do to get by. Or else you get crushed by both girls and boys.

According to Maren, there was no place for 'soft-hearted' behaviour in the illegal drug economy, or at least not in the parts where she was involved. This was endorsed wholeheartedly by many of the dealers we spoke to. One 30-year-old dealer explained that prior to her recent imprisonment she had not cried since the age of 14: 'I've always played a game . . . until I got to prison I did not cry one time. Not a single tear. And I went through *a lot* during those years.' Another female dealer expressed similar experiences and opinions. 'I had a reputation to protect,' she told us; 'I needed others to think of me as tough, hard and cynical. I let nobody know the real me, because if I did, they might consider me weak.' This story was far from uncommon in our interviews, illustrated by yet another dealer: 'I embraced that role. I was invulnerable. No one could hurt me, no matter what. I never let people know the real me.'

The importance of this strategy could be seen in the women's stories of how they were constantly being 'tested' by male dealers: 'From the moment you show that you are affected, by blushing or being embarrassed, then they've got you. You should be pretty good at displacing your emotions, that's for sure,' one dealer explained. Another dealer emphasized the importance of always staying calm:

A girl once told me, 'I wish I was you, 'cause you are always cool as ice, no matter what.' Then I thought to myself, 'No I'm not, I just have to pretend, and keep my face on, even though I'm scared to death.'

Emotional detachment is about being able to pretend that one is emotionally cool and 'heartless'. Many research participants described this as the key to gaining approval from the men. However, at a more personal level, the women also used this strategy to detach themselves from difficult situations – to avoid the emotional pain. 'I guess it is a defence

mechanism,' a dealer said. Emotional detachment is often used in combination with both the violent posture and desexualization strategies. Desexualization even requires some emotional detachment. For example, female dealers acted as if sexual harassment did not affect them, even though it did. Emotional detachment can be used to gain street capital in a gendered drug economy, but it comes at a cost. 'I have lost myself over the years, and now I don't know who I am,' one dealer said, and many dealers reported that they did not know who they really were any more. Maren explained, 'The longer the time, the harder it gets to get back to one's true emotions, to know what you are supposed to feel.' Dealing with sexual harassment and other degrading experiences while acting as if they mean nothing is difficult. The marginal and vulnerable position that female drug dealers hold creates some dilemmas that men avoid.

Service-mindedness

Bente was 45 years old and started dealing illegal drugs quite late in life. She explained that she lost her job and needed to provide for her two children: 'I called a friend and asked him directly, "Listen, I have no job and no income, I have to do something. Can you give me something?"' From that day she started a close collaboration with her male friend. Bente did not have to work her way up the drug hierarchy. She went straight to being a high-level dealer. 'To me this has always been a job,' she said, 'a regular job, which I pride myself on doing properly.' Many drug dealers describe their activity as a 'business' and constantly compare what they do to what goes on in legal markets (Dwyer and Moore, 2010). Although business often is associated with masculinity, such an image of drug dealing is far easier to combine with being a woman than one emphasizing crime, street masculinity and violence.

For Bente, the key to being a successful and respected dealer was to be serious about the business: 'Everyone respects you, not because they fear you but because you have done it the way it should be done.' She said she had a reputation for never snitching: 'You know, people in my position need to be one hundred percent reliable.' Trust is paramount in the drug business, and it was important to her never to cheat any of her buyers. In this way, Bente also gained customer loyalty. 'There has never been a single person in court who admitted that I sold them anything,' she stated with pride. Many dealers stressed the importance of being loyal to the customers. 'You will not get far by lying and cheating. I truly believe "what goes around comes around",' a dealer said. Another dealer emphasized the importance of not diluting the product: 'It's all about being reasonable and fair. If you're a bluffer, you might make it that one time, but you won't survive in the long term.' One of the other dealers was less self-confident. In her opinion, she needed to be service-minded because customers expected female dealers to deliver drugs faster than men.

Being reliable, reasonable, fast and trustworthy are examples of how women can use both smartness and business ethics to be successful dealers without having to resort to violence (Denton, 2001; Hutton, 2005). This corresponds with the findings of Morgan and Joe (1996) that women not only were successful dealers but also took pride in organizing the business around 'ethical standards'. Bente even argued that service-mindedness was something that came naturally to her because she was a mother.

One of the dealers was very clear that she was against violence. When asked about how she dealt with people who owed her money, she replied:

Well, I have a lot of money outstanding. There are many people that owe me money . . . If they don't have money, they don't have money, right? I'm the one that has been dumb and put them into such a bad situation. I just need to take it into account. It's not like beating people half to death makes things any better.

Men in the drug economy usually stereotype women as more untrustworthy and liable to snitch (Covington, 1985: 330). As with the other strategies presented above, service-mindedness can be seen as a way to prove these stereotypes wrong. Unlike the other strategies, however, service-mindedness is not an attempt to be 'one of the guys' and gain street capital. It is instead an attempt to change, or redefine, the rules of the game.

Female dealers may emphasize service-mindedness because they cannot compete in terms of a readiness to use violence and self-presentation as 'gangsters'. One female dealer, for example, suggested that physique barred her from threatening creditors with violence. Her strategy was instead to forget about them and see the money as a 'sunk cost':

It's been like that a lot, because I feel that's what pays in the long run. It's not only a nice gesture, you know, it is also a selfish choice, because it pays to be generous. It establishes trust. That person is probably not the one to snitch you out.

Service-mindedness is thus a rather intelligent way to deal with an inferior status (Hutton, 2005). Dealers who utilized this strategy often had a more varied social background than other dealers. Some had held a legitimate job prior to their dealing career, and others had been enrolled in higher education. These dealers were able to draw upon a broader set of resources, which was required for successful enactment of this strategy.

Overcompensating, doing masculinity and challenging the 'rules'

Many illegal drug markets and social contexts of drug dealing are characterized by street culture (Bourgois, 2003), street masculinity (Mullins, 2006) or what we have described as street capital (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). The relevance of the street capital concept for a discussion of female dealers can be summarized briefly. Female drug dealers have less embodied street capital – *and they know it*. As demonstrated above, their strategies for overcoming this disadvantage are multifaceted. They involve 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in complex ways, and they present several dilemmas.

Some previous research has argued that female drug dealers avoid adopting 'typically male behaviour'. Their argument is that, by dressing and acting differently from men, women do not call attention to their illegal actions. Thus, being a woman can be an advantage (Jacobs and Miller, 1998). Strategies to avoid the police are of little use, however, if the potential dealer is not accepted by other actors in the illegal drug economy. Among the disadvantages that female dealers face, many are of an economic character. In our interviews, some women said they had to pay double price if they wanted to hire

a torpedo (see the quote in the introduction). They were also expected to pay more in interest if they needed to borrow money. These findings contradict others in the literature. Adler, for example, reported how men 'bent the rules for the "ladies",' meaning that women were given more time to pay back their debts (Adler, 1993: 91). She described it as a chauvinistic trait. Both observations, however, illustrate the inferior role of women in the illegal drug economy. Women are not regarded as equal, and if they want to be included they need to work hard for it.

For many women, the best strategy to become a respected drug dealer is to refrain from sexual relations. In this way, they avoid being seen as a sexual object or, even worse, as a 'whore'. Conversely, the status of male dealers increases with the number of women they are seen with, but they must avoid homosexual relationships. Both men and women have to downplay femininity and avoid acting in a womanly manner. Mullins (2006), for example, describes the constant and rather complex identity work that goes into avoiding being seen as a 'punk'. Violent posture and emotional detachment are also shared strategies for both female and male dealers. There seems to be a tendency for female dealers to overcompensate by trying to self-present as even more violent and emotionally detached than men. It also seems as if they have more problems with this role-playing than many men do. This may be because it is further from the traditional gender role of women and thus it is harder to combine with other identities, such as that of a mother or girlfriend.

Service-mindedness differs from the other strategies because it challenges or opposes the rationale of street culture. It is not about gaining or upholding street capital but rather about trying to define other rules of the game. This strategy is probably the one with the greatest potential for women, because they do not have to work against their embodied characteristics. It also means that they can combine being a drug dealer with other female gender roles. Carlen and her colleagues found that criminal women rejected the conventional gender roles offered to them. Yet they did not want to swap the conventional female roles for conventional male ones. What they wanted was independence and success (Carlen, 1985). The service-minded approach to drug dealing, however, probably fits best within low-scale, private and soft-drug markets, where violent street culture is less dominant.

Structurally constrained but competent

There are two main theoretical perspectives in studies of female drug dealers. The traditional approach describes female dealers as marginalized, passive and helpless victims (Adler, 1993; Maher, 1997; Maher and Daly, 1996; Steffensmeier, 1983). It emphasizes the *structural* constraints women face in a gendered economy and the troubles women have in a hypermasculine social context. In contrast, more recent studies describe women as skilful and competent dealers, having some advantages because of their female characteristics (Anderson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Denton and O'Malley, 1999). This latter approach emphasizes the *agency* of women who get involved in drug dealing.

The different perspectives can be explained empirically partly by the fact that researchers have studied different markets, with different structural prospects for women. However, the divergence also reflects a fundamental theoretical difference between structural and agency-based explanations in social science and some tensions within

feminism. The traditional approach derives from a feminist perspective that emphasizes how women are oppressed in a male-dominated society (or subculture). The newer approach is a more radical, emancipating feminist approach that emphasizes the importance of social science in patriarchal oppression. In short, if researchers describe only the victim roles of women and neglect their successes, competence and agency, how can we expect women to see themselves differently?

By introducing the concept of gendered street capital, we suggest a compromise between these approaches. We argue that many female dealers operate in a gendered economy that puts them at a huge disadvantage. Social relations in the drug economy are power relations that regulate the positions that agents occupy. Both past and present positions influence agents' capabilities and the resources they can access and, thus, the possibilities for their actions (Bourdieu, 1977: 82–3). In other words, women are structurally constrained by their lack of embodied street capital. However, though they are structurally constrained, their embodied capital or habitus also includes possibilities for creative strategies and agency (Bourdieu, 1990). The strategies we described above are structurally limited, but they are nonetheless strategic efforts to transcend a marginal position. As Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes, however, these efforts will seldom be entirely successful, and paradoxically they often reproduce oppressive structures in the field.

Conclusion

Illegal drug markets are difficult social contexts for women, and female dealers are heavily underrepresented in most markets. Women face several challenges when dealing drugs. Most importantly, they are often stereotyped as untrustworthy, snitchers, easy to cheat and unable to protect themselves. To operate in a gendered illegal drug economy, female dealers must prove these stereotypes wrong. This is a difficult task. Female dealers often end up victimized or left in marginal positions in the economy, and sexual and physical abuse are frequent. As an illustration, many of the strategies cited above were employed to avoid sexual exploitation and violence. However, this was often not so much a consequence of the dealing activity per se, as part of the masculine street culture in which drug dealing occurred.

Nevertheless, women are not entirely powerless, and men are not entirely privileged. Both men and women in the hard-drug economy typically come from marginalized backgrounds, and many have suffered traumatizing experiences in early childhood and adolescence. Poverty, sexual assaults and parental drug abuse are common to both male and female dealers' lives. In that sense, they are all victims. Still, after entering certain parts of the illegal drug economy, men are privileged, their lives are better and it is easier for them to succeed than it is for women.

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