



Law-abiding criminals: Young adults' drift *into* and *out of* recreational drug sales

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Abstract

Traditionally, research on illegal drug supply has mainly focused on marginalised urban populations, whose lives and dealing practices are shaped by social exclusion, poverty, ethnic inequalities and cultures of violence. This article contributes to the small but growing body of research that focuses on drug sales among society's more privileged groups by individuals who, aside from using and supplying illegal drugs, live largely law-abiding lives. Based on 32 interviews from Denmark, the article analyses socio-economically mainstream young adults' gradual drift into and out of profit-generating drug sales. We use the findings to argue that much bottom-level drug supply can be conceptualised as 'recreational drug sales' – that is, best understood not as a social aberration, but rather as an interwoven aspect of mainstream society, insofar as it is sporadic, experimental and leisure-based in nature, and often does not challenge sellers' involvement in the labour market/educational system or their identities as 'respectable' citizens.

Keywords

Drug markets, Dealing careers, Social supply, Drift, Drug dealing, Denmark

Introduction

In recent decades, Danish drug policy has become more punitive, involving increased penalties for small-scale drug selling (Houborg et al., 2008). This development has been fuelled by discourses linking drug selling with organised crime and street gangs (Søgaaard & Nielsen, 2021; Søgaaard et al., 2021). In such discourses, drug sellers are often depicted as vicious and unscrupulous (adult) 'pushers' who lure and prey on vulnerable young people (see B.T., 2004; Frantzen, 2006; TV2 Lorry, 2009; Jyllands-Posten, 2019). The stereotype of the predatory (adult) drug dealer is also enshrined in laws around drug supply. For instance, in Denmark, drug distribution in settings mainly frequented by young people is considered an aggravating circumstance (Danish State Attorney, 2022). The situation in Denmark resembles that of other countries. In the United Kingdom, the United States and France, for example, illegal drug markets are typically depicted as uncivilised arenas populated by 'outsiders' and evil 'others', who are driven by greed and pursuit of profit (Coomber, 2006), and who stand outside or in opposition to mainstream society and values (Jacques & Wright, 2015; Salinas, 2018; Perrin et al., 2021). Critics have argued, however, that such

depictions represent a reductionist discourse that imposes othering and scapegoating by assimilating all drug sellers into a single spoiled identity, while the reality is in fact much more diverse (see Murphy et al., 1990; Coomber, 2010; Askew & Salinas, 2019; Perrin et al., 2021). In order to nuance our understanding of the varied nature of lower-end drug markets, this article uses interviews with 32 socio-economically mainstream young adults in Denmark to analyse their drift *into* and *out of* profit-generating drug sales.

Traditionally, research on illegal drug supply has mainly focused on marginalised urban populations, whose lives and dealing practices are shaped by social exclusion, poverty, ethnic inequalities and cultures of violence (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2002; Bucerius, 2014). This is also the case in Scandinavia (e.g. Lalander, 2008; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011) and in Denmark, the focus of this article (e.g. Moeller, 2017; Søgaard et al., 2019; Kalkan, 2021). As noted by Salinas (2018), however, there is today a small but growing body of research that explores drug sales among society's more privileged groups (see Curcione, 1997; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Jacques & Wright, 2015; Salinas, 2018; Perrin et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2022). Furthermore, recent years have also seen a growth in studies focusing on so-called 'friendship markets' (Dickinson, 2017), composed of relatively mainstream young people who, aside from using drugs and functioning as 'friend suppliers', live largely law-abiding lives (Coomber & Turnbull, 2007; Duffy et al., 2008; Potter, 2009; Coomber, 2010). While young people's friend-to-friend drug supply is often best described as 'social supply', because it does not involve – or involves only minimally – drug-for-money transactions (Potter, 2009; Coomber & Moyle, 2014), research shows that some young people sporadically or for longer periods engage in profit-generating 'real' dealing (Taylor & Potter, 2013. See also Murphy et al., 1990; Jacinto et al., 2008; Werse & Müller, 2016).

From the two latter bodies of studies we can derive three important points: One is that much bottom-level drug supply should not be seen as a social aberration confined to what Salinas terms 'a particular subset of "usual suspects", existing on the margins of civil society' (2018, p. 227). Rather, much drug supply is today interwoven into the fabric of mainstream society, and often done by individuals who are far removed from milieus of social disorganisation, street violence and gangsterdom (ibid.). Drug markets are thus heterogeneous, and many drug suppliers do not fit the 'pusher stereotype' described in the above (Coomber, 2006, 2010). Secondly, mainstream young people's drug selling is often not based on a strong commitment to establishing a criminal career. Hence, they tend to oscillate between moving into and out of drug sales (see also Adler, 1985). Lastly, while some research today exists on mainstream young people's pathways *into* profit-generating drug supply, few studies have systematically focused on such people's moves *out of* drug sales (exceptions are Jacques & Wright, 2015; Werse & Müller, 2016).

Against this background, this article draws on 32 in-depth interviews with young adults in Denmark, who can be described as 'law-abiding criminals' (Askew & Salinas, 2019, p. 311), in that all came from socio-economically mainstream backgrounds and led otherwise law-abiding lifestyles, involving participation in the legitimate labour market or educational system, while at the same time using illegal drugs and occasionally or regularly engaging in profit-generating drug sales. We use these interviews to explore how young adults, embedded in mainstream society and conventional roles, drift into and out of drug dealing. While the first part of the analysis focuses on the different pathways into drug dealing, the second part outlines the different factors facilitating moves out of dealing. In the conclusion, we discuss how the term 'recreational drug sales' (Jacinto et al., 2008, p. 437) might be useful to capture the often sporadic, experimental and leisure-based nature of most of our participants' selling practices.

Analytical framework: Drifting *into* and *out* of drug sales

In analysing how young individuals become involved in drug dealing, researchers have argued for the usefulness of Matza's (1964) concept of 'drift' (see Murphy et al., 1990; Jacinto et al., 2008; Taylor & Potter, 2013; Werse & Müller, 2016). Originally, Matza developed the concept of drift to account for youth delinquency. Contrary to the 'deviant subculture model' (e.g. Cohen, 1955), which took commitment to an oppositional subculture to be crucial to young people's deviancy, and saw the 'delinquent' as fundamentally different from the law-abiding, Matza's work highlights the fluidity of many young people's move into and out of deviancy and crime. According to Matza, delinquents are often not that different from non-delinquents since for the majority of the time they are conventional in both belief and conduct. Rather than being fully committed to deviant values, many instead 'exist in limbo between convention and crime' (Matza, 1964, p. 28), and therefore delinquent acts are best understood as a result of episodic releases from conventional controls and moral restraints. According to Matza, young people primarily become 'available for delinquent acts' (1964, p. 89), through a process of 'drift', involving affinity (proximity to criminal opportunities), affiliation (social relations and learning processes) and signification. While the latter can include external 'labelling' (Matza, 1969), relevant to this article, it also refers to the role of 'techniques of neutralisation' (Sykes & Matza, 1957) in sporadically freeing the individual from conventional restraints. This includes individuals' effort to justify and rationalise deviant acts, for instance through denials of responsibility or through appeals to higher loyalties, such as wanting to help a friend.

In the context of drug dealing, the concept of 'drift' has been used to describe those individuals who do not make conscious choices to become involved in dealing, but rather gradually move into drug sales in such small and seemingly innocuous steps that they are barely noticeable by the individuals themselves (Taylor & Potter, 2013). The concept of 'drifting into dealing' was first introduced into social drug research by Murphy et al. (1990), who identified five basic ways of entry into drug sales. These are: (1) *go-between dealing*, where individuals with a good connection start selling to drug-using friends and acquaintances (see also Potter, 2009; Taylor & Potter, 2013); (2) *stash dealing*, where individuals sell from their own stash, typically to subsidise their own use (see also Potter, 2009; Coomber & Moyle, 2014); (3) *connoisseur dealing*, where individuals' desire for high quality drugs leads them to start purchasing wholesale; (4) *apprenticeship*, where individuals learn about dealing from interacting with others (see also Werse & Müller, 2016); and (5) *expansion of product line*, where individuals move from supplying low- to higher-price products (see also Taylor & Potter, 2013). Adding to this, Werse and Müller (2016) found that (6) *the lure of adventure*, (7) *supply guarantee* and (8) *dealer fame*, in the form of social recognition from peers, can also facilitate drifts into drug sales (see also Jacques & Wright, 2015). And Jacinto et al. (2008) argued that transitions into drug sales can also be driven by (9) *profit motives*, and more conscious choices. Finally, a recent study by Berger et al. (2022) found that (10) *ideological idealism*, aimed at promoting a drug liberalisation agenda, can also play a role in middle-class individuals' drift into drug sales.

Importantly, existing studies suggest that different modes of entry are not equally important in all contexts. For instance, while the profit motive was only voiced by few of the middle-class participants in Murphy et al.'s (1990) study, it was a key motivation for many of the middle-class participants in Jacinto et al.'s (2008) and Werse and Müller's (2016) studies. In order to contribute to a better understanding of the situation in Scandinavia, this article aims to shed light on some of the main avenues that lead mainstream Danish young adults to engage in drug sales. In the first part of the analysis, we outline the six most prevalent

pathways in our sample. While the most dominant modes of entry were ‘go-between,’ ‘stash dealing’ and ‘apprenticeship,’ the less prevalent were ‘adventure,’ ‘dealer fame’ and ‘profit motive.’¹ Most of our participants were not self-consciously committed to deviant values and lifestyles (see also Murphy et al., 1990; Jacinto et al., 2008; Potter, 2009; Taylor & Potter, 2013). In the analysis we instead demonstrate how our participants’ drifts into drug sales were often coupled with the use of ‘techniques of neutralisation,’ serving to construct supply practices as not ‘real’ dealing, and the supplier as not a ‘real’ dealer.

As with other types of offending (Laub & Sampson, 1993), drug selling often has a temporary character (Adler, 1985). In the second part of the analysis we draw inspiration from Matza’s concept of ‘drifting out of delinquency’ (1964, p. 54) to explore the different factors and processes that led many of our participants to reduce or cease their sales activities. While Matza never provided an elaborate account of ‘drifting out of delinquency,’ Carlsson (2018) argues that the term bears resemblance to ‘desistance’ from crime. In criminological studies, desistance is often described as a fluid ‘zigzag’ process, characterised by lapse and relapse (Maruna, 2001), thus reflecting Matza’s concept of ‘drift’. While criminological life-course studies have argued that desistance is often facilitated by structural ‘turning points,’ i.e. changes in individuals’ external circumstances, such as marriage, employment or parenthood (Laub & Sampson, 2003), more recent studies argue that life-course changes are often preceded by subjective processes, such as changes in attitudes, shame/regret and altered self-perceptions (Maruna, 2001). Though disagreements persist with regard to causation, scholars generally agree that desistance from crime is often facilitated by a dynamic combination of both structural and subjective changes (LeBel et al., 2008). Adding to this, Weaver (2012) argues that changes in inter-personal relations between co-offenders can also play a key role in desistance processes. Not only can changes in inter-personal relationships restrict an individual’s criminal opportunities, relational changes can also trigger reflexive re-evaluations of criminal activities. In the second part of the analysis, we draw on these insights to shed light on the structural, subjective and relational processes that led many of our participants to reduce or cease selling activities.

Methods

The article is based on interviews with 32 young adults in Denmark, who have first-hand experience with both social and commercial drug supply. Participants were recruited from two research projects conducted at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University. The *first project* focused on social drug supply among young people in Denmark. As part of this study, we recruited 33 participants from a national survey on young people’s drug use in 2019 (Søgaard et al., 2020) for interviews focusing on their drug sourcing practices, and their possible involvement in social and commercial drug supply. Of the 33 interviewees, 20 had experience with profit-generating drug supply either to friends ($n = 20$) or strangers ($n = 11$). The *second project* focused on drug sourcing from individuals who buy drugs via delivery services, and on young drug users’ possible pathways into social and commercial supply (Søgaard, 2019a, 2019b). As part of this project, we recruited 28 participants in 2018 through personal networks and snowballing methods (Heckathorn, 1997). Of these, 12 had personal experience with profit-generating drug supply either to friends ($n = 7$) or strangers ($n = 9$).

1 The remaining four modes of entry outlined in the existing literature – ‘connoisseur dealing,’ ‘expansion of product line,’ ‘supply guarantee’ and ‘ideological idealism’ – did not appear in our interviews. This of course is not to say that these did not play a role for some of our participants.

This article brings together findings from the 32 interviews with young adults who have experience with profit-generating drug supply to friends and/or strangers. The sample included 19 males and 13 females. The average age of the participants was 25.7. Most of the participants were either regular or occasional users of cannabis. Many occasionally also used cocaine, MDMA/ecstasy, amphetamine or hallucinogenic mushrooms. All but one participant were ethnic white Danes, and in terms of their labour market and/or educational status, three were employed as highly skilled knowledge workers, 10 were MA students, nine were BA students, three were high school students, six were employed as manual labourers, care workers or in the service industry. Only one participant was officially unemployed. This participant was a certified carpenter who was on sick leave at the time of the interview. Importantly, apart from using, and supplying illegal drugs to others, most participants stated that they were either not, or only to a very limited extent, involved in other criminal activities.

In the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide to explore participants' entry into supply, their career progressions, and how they related to the dealer label. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and later coded using NVivo. The data arising from the interviews were coded deductively around emerging themes such as 'drug sharing among friends', 'initiation into commercial supply', 'reasons for supply', 'experiences with commercial supply', 'views on drug dealing/people who deal drugs' and 'motives for reducing or stopping dealing', resulting in the thematic analysis presented below. The studies were approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency, and pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Drifting into 'real' dealing

Correlating with their pattern of drug use, most participants had experience with profit-generating sales of cannabis, and some (also) with sales of amphetamine, MDMA/ecstasy, hallucinogenic mushrooms and cocaine. In terms of the intensity and level of their sales, most can be described as 'light sellers', in that their sales practices were sporadic and only involved small amounts of drugs, typically sold in private settings and through personal networks. A smaller group were 'moderate sellers', in that their sales activities were more consistent and involved larger volumes.

In the following, we outline the most prevalent pathways into profit-generating sales as well as the ways in which our participants negotiated the dealer identity in this process. Importantly, the different pathways should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, as we illustrate, drift into drug selling is often facilitated by multiple overlapping processes and motives.

Go-between selling

Most participants did not make conscious decisions to become drug sellers. In line with findings from other studies (Murphy et al., 1990; Jacinto et al., 2008; Taylor & Potter, 2013; Werse & Müller, 2016), many drifted into 'real' dealing from a background in social supply. Many had often sorted out friends, who were afraid to contact an unknown commercial drug seller or did not have the right connections. While some acted as '*go-betweens*' as mere favours for less experienced friends, others explained how they sometimes added a small fee for their service on top of the price their friends had to pay. Many justified this with reference to the trouble and risk they took sourcing the drugs. Though go-between supply can involve profits, it was rarely motivated by a desire to make profits, but rather by social concerns such as wanting to help friends (see also Coomber & Turnbull, 2007). However, as

the following illustrates, if go-betweeners do not restrict the number of recipients, this can at times result in drifts into supply that is more systematised and has higher profits:

At one point, my boyfriend and I were selling. Or rather, it was us who took care of obtaining it [amphetamine], and then it just got more and more. Actually, I didn't earn anything. It just paid for my own use. It started with four friends asking us if we could also buy something for them. Then later on they also needed drugs for some other friends. Not strangers, but friends of friends. People just like speed. I don't know if you can even say I really sold. I just bought large quantities, and then others could come and pick it up at my place. We did it to fund our own usage, never to make money. All of a sudden, it just got more and more. Without me even noticing. (Olivia, 28 y/o, MA student in medicine).

The above illustrates how profits generated through go-between sales are often used to finance suppliers' own use, and how sales activities can escalate as a result of what Werse and Müller (2016) term a 'demand-pull' process, i.e. through friends' and acquaintances' requests for drugs. It also shows how intensifications in supply can be so subtle that they largely go unnoticed by the involved parties. One reason for this is that escalations in supply are often coupled with rhetorical neutralisations of supply behaviour, involving both appeals to higher loyalties and denials of injury (Sykes & Matza, 1957). In the above, the female participant thus constructs her activities as not real drug selling, by insisting that her clients were not 'strangers' but 'friends' or 'friends of friends', and by emphasising that she did not supply due to greed, but rather to subsidise her own drug use and to help out friends and acquaintances, who did not suffer from drug addiction, but just also liked drugs.

Stash dealing

Entry into drug sales can also happen through 'stash dealing', where drug users sell surplus from their own stash (Murphy et al., 1990). As also illustrated in the above, some engaged in stash selling by buying larger quantities – thus lowering their purchase price – and then re-selling it to acquaintances at a profit. Others, who produced the drugs themselves, did so by default. The latter included participants who were involved in small-scale cultivation of cannabis or hallucinogenic mushrooms. While some sold excess crops to subsidise their own use or to cover expenses related to growing (see also Potter, 2010), others did so because they did not want to see 'good drugs go to waste'. As the following illustrates, the motives for selling excess crops can change over time and become more profit-oriented.

It started with us wanting to try mushrooms. I figured the easiest way was to grow them. You can order grow-kits online from Amsterdam. I started growing and I just got so many. I couldn't use them myself. I shared some with my friends, but I still had many left, so I thought, I need to sell these. Together with a guy I study with, I got into this WICKR-forum and we made a post: 'Hey I sell mushrooms'. I think I earned 3000 DKK. A lot of money and quite easy. It wasn't like I planned to sell, but then I talked to another friend and we agreed: 'Okay, let's try to sell, like for real'. So we bought three big grow-kits. They didn't produce very well though. We sold it, but the profit was meagre. It wasn't really worth the effort. (Benjamin, 22 y/o, BA student in social sciences).

Many described their drift into go-between and stash dealing as a casual and quite easy process. While stash dealing has traditionally involved individuals selling small amounts to drug-using friends, the above shows how the internet has enabled easier, and digitally mediated, drifts into sales to strangers. Not only has the internet enabled easier access to

sophisticated production equipment (Decorte et al., 2011), the availability of online platforms has also made it easier for inexperienced sellers to access a large customer base (Demant et al., 2019; Bakken et al., 2019).

Apprenticeship

Similar to the findings of Murphy et al. (1990), most of the female participants in our study had entered drug sales through a relationship with a drug-selling boyfriend, where they had become a kind of apprentice and assistant to their boyfriend. Their route into an assistant role typically began with an intimate relationship. One female participant, for instance, described how she got romantically involved with a young male high school student, and while she knew he used cannabis, and occasionally sold to friends, she only later realised the extent of his selling activities. By then she had become so emotionally committed that she did not want to end the relationship. In time, she instead came to accept her boyfriend's selling activities. Contributing to this was the fact that she herself was a daily cannabis user, and her attitudes towards selling were therefore relatively liberal. Early on, she also started to enjoy the rewards of drug selling. Not only did her boyfriend generously pay for nights out, he also always had cannabis around for her to smoke, and her use escalated as a result.

He always had loads of hash in our apartment, just for us to smoke. So when I was at home: 'Oh I feel like a joint'. So sometimes, almost before you finished smoking one [joint], you'll be making the next one. (Susan, 18 y/o, barista).

Of course, it's one thing to accept that one's partner sells drugs, but it's another to actively assist with this. The young women's pathway into an active assistant role often went through an informal learning process, where through observing their boyfriends weighing, packing, selling or delivering drugs, they began to acquire knowhow and skills, and also had their moral boundaries gradually moved.

It's not like I gave it a lot of thought. You just kind of like get sucked into it, and suddenly you are involved. (Susan, 18 y/o, barista).

Crucial to the 'apprentice mode of entry' was also the women's sense of moral obligation towards their boyfriends. Several for instance described how their involvement had deepened because their boyfriend had asked for their *help*, which had led some to feel that, as a good girlfriend, they ought to help their boyfriend when in need. One young woman described how her drug-selling boyfriend sometimes asked her to hand over drugs to customers if he himself was not at home. Another explained how her boyfriend had lost his driver's license, and she had started to help him by driving him when he needed to pick up large, bulk quantities of cannabis or deliver drugs to customers:

I guess I was the driver, really (...). I did feel some pressure [to do it]. For instance, if something [cannabis] had to be picked up or delivered. It's not like he forced me. I think it was more me thinking: 'If I say no, then he'll need to find someone else. No, I'll do it'. (Susan, 24 y/o, kindergarten teacher).

While most had only assisted their drug-selling boyfriends sporadically, others became more deeply involved and developed a more official assistant role. This was most clear with

one female participant, who explained how she had to work as a drug runner to pay off a debt to her boyfriend:

My ex-boyfriend sold [drugs]. I borrowed money from him once, and I had to work for him to pay off what I owed. That was the agreement we made. I knew what that meant. I had lived with him for half a year. I had to cut up [cannabis] and drive around [delivering cannabis to customers]. (Jane, 23 y/o, studying to become industrial painter).

Though apprentices often skip the social supply phase and enter straight into commercial drug sales, most did not see themselves as ‘dealers’. In interviews, many dis-identified with the dealer identity, by use of rhetorical denials of responsibility. For instance, by pointing out that they had not organised the sales, and by emphasising that they had merely ‘helped out’, that their activities had only been occasional, and that they did not own the drugs, and therefore did not directly profit from the sales.

Adventure and friendship

In practice, pathways into drug sales are often driven by different concerns and overlapping motives. This was evident in an interview with Noah, a 24-year-old university student, who explained how he had initially become involved in drug sales because he wanted to help a drug-selling friend, but also how he later became seduced by the adventurous aspects of drug selling.

Noah: I bought cannabis from this guy, Hakim. He was really nice. We had a really good time, chatting about music, and smoking joints together. Hell, I even drove for him.

Interviewer: As a drug runner?

Noah: Yeah. He called me one day and asked: ‘Could you maybe do a bit of driving for me?’ He had lost his driver’s license. I said ‘yes’. He was a friend (...). I drove for him 10–20 times, about half a day at a time. We cruised from one customer to another. He had other people driving for him. I drove for him when he needed extra help. We had a good time and it was exciting. It was cool and awesome to be driving around and selling cannabis but also, I just connected with Hakim. I didn’t have many friends at the time, and him being an immigrant. Before that, I didn’t know any immigrants. It was just an exciting new world, so different from sitting at home with my mom and dad. I didn’t even get paid. I don’t think I even got any hash for it. For me it was just about having a good time and helping a friend.

None of our participants started selling due to thrill seeking. Once involved however, some found drug selling to be somewhat of an adventure, involving meeting new people and the fun of doing something illegal. Ongoing involvement is thus sometimes motivated by a ‘seduction of crime’ (Katz, 1988), and for some middle-class individuals, by the thrill of flirting with a ‘gangsta’ identity (see also Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2010). Furthermore, however, the above case also indicates how a desire for friendship and belonging can also be a motivating factor when young people become involved in drug sales with others. In the above case, for instance, Noah not only indicates how he felt lonely (‘I didn’t have many friends at the time’), but also how a seduction of the social aspect of drug selling was crucial to his decision to help out as a drug runner.

Dealer fame

Only two of our participants explained that they had drifted into escalated supply roles due to a desire for prestige or 'dealer fame' (see also Werse & Müller, 2016):

In a group like that, having the dealer role is like having the trump card. Being able to cater for people's demand just gives one a good feeling. I had something they wanted, so everybody wanted to be my friend. (...) When I stopped [selling], I just went back to being one of the guys. (Patrick, 28 y/o, employed in service sector).

Peer group recognition, stemming from being able to cater for friends' desire for drugs, can be a motivating factor in drifts into sales (see also Jacques & Wright, 2015). User cultures, however, are not homogeneous. While selling to friends can be a source of status in some peer groups, in other groups the picture is more complex. Sandberg and Pedersen (2010) have described how the cannabis culture in particular is characterised by solidarity-based exchange and by a scepticism towards capitalism (see also Sandberg, 2012). In this context, making profit off friends is sometimes stigmatised and seen as evidence of greed (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2010), or of desperation associated with addiction, as illustrated in the following.

I've sold, but it was tricky. I didn't want to make money off my friends, only to sell to peripheral acquaintances. But also, you don't want to be known as someone who sells. (...) Not always, but usually, people who sell have a drug problem. I just didn't want that kind of reputation. (Jens, 29 y/o, university teacher).

The above shows how fear of reputational damage can also lead some to limit their sales activities. Furthermore, the above also indicates how 'relational concerns' can play a role in desistance processes, as will be elaborated later.

Money-driven

Only four participants stated profit-making as their primary motive for engaging in drug sales. One of these was Dennis, an 18-year-old high school student from an upper middle-class family. Akin to the findings of Jacques and Wright (2015), Dennis' motives for engaging in drugs sales were a desire for luxury and the fact that he was tired of having to ask his parents for extra money to finance his hedonistic consumption. This in turn had led Dennis to accept an offer from the person he bought cannabis from to work for this person as a drug runner:

Well, I wanted to be more independent, like be able to decide how I spend my money, and not having to ask my parents for money all the time. Truth is, I like to buy lots of clothes and shoes, and when out with my friends, I like to pay for their drinks and stuff. [By selling drugs] I earned 800 DKK a day, so I had plenty of money.

Another participant, Tommy, explained how his desire to make big money had led him to see his drug-using friends as business opportunities.

When I started smoking [cannabis], I hung out with people who also smoked. I saw there was a demand, so I started thinking business opportunities. I saved up money and bought quite a lot of hash ... I thought big business. I thought millionaire, Wall Street, ladies and stuff. (Tommy, 32 y/o, BA student in social work).

Unlike the abovementioned cases, two other male participants explained how they had started selling due to financial distress (see also Murthy et al., 1990). While one had started selling to earn money, which he used to pay off a relatively large debt, the other explained that his parents had kicked him out, and as a result, he slept on friends' couches and lacked money to pay for food and other necessities. In this context, a fellow student had offered him the opportunity to work as a 'sitter', managing incoming customer orders on a drug phone line owned by a third person who ran a larger drug dealing enterprise organised as a pizza-style delivery service (see also Sogaard et al., 2019).

The participants who had made an active choice to start selling were the ones who most readily embraced the 'dealer' identity.

Drifting out of dealing

At the time of the interview, the majority of our participants had either reduced or stopped selling. This indicates the temporary character of much drug selling. In the following, we therefore outline our participants' pathways out of drug selling. Importantly, just as drift into drug selling is often facilitated by multiple overlapping processes, so too is drift *out* of drug selling. In the following, we describe the different structural, relational and subjective processes leading to desistance.

Changes in life course

Many of our participants described their desistance from drugs sales as caused by life course changes. In line with studies showing that many young people 'mature out' of drug use as they grow older and transition into more adult roles and responsibilities (Winick, 1962; Shiner, 2009), several of our participants described how their selling activities had ended when they finished studying and got their first 'real' adult job. While some identified specific 'turning points' (Laub & Sampson, 2003), for most, desistance was a process, involving a gradual re-embedding in conventional culture and social controls. One participant, who had been involved in organised drug sales, described how his sales activities had drastically reduced after he moved in with his girlfriend and had his first child. Starting a family had led him to identify with a more adult and parental role, which he believed was incompatible with drug selling. Occasionally, however, some friends still contacted him to buy cannabis:

I'm an old man now. I don't sell anymore, though I still sometimes feel I'm the friend-pusher for some of my friends, who come here to buy hash. It doesn't matter though, because they are good guys. (Torben, 32 y/o, working as carpenter).

The above shows how drifting out is a gradual process, but also how 'supply requests' from drug-using friends, who continue to see the individual as 'active' or 'semi-active', rather than as an 'ex-seller', can sometimes prolong the exit process.

Fear of legal and social sanctions

None of our participants had been caught selling drugs by police. A few, however, reported that experiences of only barely having 'dodged the bullet', as one put it, had been crucial to their decision to decrease selling. For most participants, however, a more generalised fear of getting caught by police had, over time, mentally exhausted them, leading them to stop selling:

I took quite a lot of safety precautions, but yeah there's always a bit of paranoia, the 'what if'. I got somewhat used to it, but it was always there, the paranoia. It was one of the factors that led me to stop. It just wasn't worth it. (David, 23 y/o, BA student in journalism).

Aside from fear of imprisonment, several reported how, as they grew older, they had become more concerned with how community rumours about their selling activities could potentially have negative implications for their (future) careers in the legitimate labour market:

It [selling] can simply close off some opportunities. Like, if my boss heard about it... If he knew, I would get fired. It's a small town and word gets around, right. (Peter, 23 y/o, employed as woodworker).

The above shows how the process of 'maturing out' for some involves a gradual shift in perspective away from the short-term rewards of drug selling and towards more long-term identities and conventional life prospects. As part of this process, many began to see drug selling as too risky, or as Jacques and Wright put it, 'not in [their] best long-term interest' (2015, p. 135).

Changes in social and business relations

Changes in social relations between co-offenders also played a key role in desistance processes (see also Weaver, 2012). This involved both changes in intimate relations as well as changes in business-relations. Regarding the former, all of the female participants who had functioned as assistants for a drug-selling boyfriend described how their sales activities had stopped when the romantic relationship ended. Other participants had ceased or reduced their selling activities due to changes in their business-relations. For instance, one female participant explained how the arrest of the person she purchased drugs from meant that she was, for a time, unable to source amphetamine, which led her to drastically reduce her go-between selling activities. Another participant, who functioned as a small-scale wholesaler for two user-dealing individuals with a large network of drug-using friends, explained how he lost his business when the two 'user-dealers' decided to buy their drugs elsewhere. Since this participant did not want to engage in street sales himself, and because he had been unable to find a new 'user-dealer' to supply, at the time of the interview his business was on pause:

I sold from 2017 and until... the beginning of this year [2019]. Lucas [user-dealer] had this other friend who was also selling but got into some financial trouble. So he [Lucas] wanted to help him, by buying from him instead. I told him he could get it cheaper from me, but he really wanted to help his friend. Sofia [other user-dealer], wanted out, or she went with Lucas to that other guy. I don't know. Anyway, I didn't want to sell in the street. I tried to see if I could replace those two. I did find someone, but he turned out to be unreliable. So I thought, I won't bother selling right now (Alexander, 24 y/o, BA student in business economics).

A third participant explained how his selling had ended when he was fired as a 'sitter', managing customer orders on the drug phone line, because his employer lost faith in his ability to do the job efficiently. None of our participants ceased their selling activities due to (threats of) violent attacks from criminal competitors. One participant, however, explained how a drug-selling friend of his had been attacked by a local gang, who stole his stash of drugs. For our participant, this incident served as a reminder that it was unwise to expand

his business beyond his close network of acquaintances, as this was likely to attract attention from violent rivals.

Lack of cost-effectiveness

Aside from life-course and relational changes, desistance processes were also driven by more subjective processes. Several participants for instance explained how they had ceased selling after realising that they were not as good business entrepreneurs as they had hoped to be (see also Werse & Müller, 2016). Tommy, for instance – who, as described earlier, had dreamt of making millions from drug sales – stated the following:

I sold for about a year, but the dream was completely shattered (...). I bought it [cannabis] at too high a price, and it was poor quality. I sold it at my school and other places, but it was a total disaster. I let people buy on credit and then they didn't pay, and I smoked my own supply, and I let too many friends smoke for free, so I ended up losing money. Eventually I stopped.

Participants who exited drug sales due to lack of sufficient profits were typically those who had sold smaller amounts to people in their closer network. Since these often had an experimental rather than a determined approach to drug selling, few made any efforts to optimise their selling practices (see also Werse & Müller, 2016), and using (threats of) violence to retrieve debt was not something they even considered. The latter might be explained by their socially mainstream upbringing where violence was often rare (see also Jacques & Wright, 2015). When realising that they could not make sufficient profits, they instead casually drifted back from sales to only being users. At times, this was also a result of participants realising that drug selling to strangers can be a lot of work, sometimes for little pay.

Changing self-perceptions

Desistance processes were also facilitated by changes in self-perception, and by a new, often relationally induced, reflexivity (see Maruna, 2001; Weaver, 2012). As mentioned above, most participants did not consider themselves 'drug dealers'. For some, it thus came as a shock when others started to label and treat them as such, which ultimately triggered reflexive re-evaluations of supply activities leading some to quit these. Changes in self-perceptions were most often caused by situations where participants had been approached by strangers who wanted to buy drugs from them (see also Murphy et al., 1990; Jacinto et al., 2008), or by experiences of being objects of police attention (see also Werse & Müller, 2016). Friends, however, can also contribute to this. Noah, for instance, described how a conversation with a friend had led him to realise that he was in fact complicit in dealing by virtue of helping another friend drive his drug delivery car:

Hakim [drug dealing friend] had convinced me that I wasn't doing anything illegal, because I was only driving the car. But one day another friend said: 'You do know, you will of course also get busted. When you drive the car, you're just as much selling as he is.' Fuck yeah, he was right. So the next time Hakim asked if I could drive the car, I told him I wouldn't (...). I never ever wanted to be a dealer, I wouldn't want that. (Noah, 24 y/o, BA student in communication & culture).

As outlined by Adler (1985), many drug sellers, including assisters, do not accept the dealer identity until some external event forces them to re-evaluate their situation. Those of our participants who decided to reduce or end their selling activities after being confronted with the dealer label were those who only sold sporadically or who had mainly had an assistant role.

Moral concerns

Lastly, interviews also revealed that ‘moral concerns’ can play a role in subjective re-evaluations leading to desistance behaviour. While voiced in passing in several interviews, only one participant highlighted moral concerns as his primary reason for quitting drug sales. Unlike Werse and Müller (2016), who describe how concrete experiences of harming others, for instance by providing them with ‘bad’ drugs, can lead some to cease selling, the following illustrates how more generalised feelings of remorse about engaging in crime (see Maruna, 2001), and about wasting one’s opportunities in life, can function as an inner motivation for desistance:

I just had this big lump of guilt that uh... It like piled up inside of me, because I actually came from a good home. I have parents who care about me and like, I have options in life to make something of myself, in a proper way. I just felt, this is not for me. I don’t want to destroy my life, and I don’t want to be lying to my parents, and feel like I’m not able to look them or myself in the eyes. Like, every single day wake up and say: ‘Well you’re a criminal, Dennis. You commit crime. You’re not helping society. You’re actually just cheating, and making society a worse place to be.’ I just got to the point where... I had to distance myself from it. I don’t want to be a part of it anymore. (Dennis, 18 y/o, high school student).

While drifting into drug selling, and other types of crime, involves the release from moral constraints (Matza, 1964), the above illustrates how the reverse process of drifting out of crime often involves the individual once again becoming strongly embedded in conventional culture and morality, and thus tied to conformity (see also Carlsson, 2018).

Conclusion

In Denmark, as elsewhere, retail-level drug markets are typically described as uncivilised arenas populated by marginalised ‘others’, who stand outside or in opposition to mainstream society and values. Askew and Salinas (2019) have argued that such stereotyped understandings of the ‘drug dealer’ are rooted in the fact that criminal justice systems (and the media), tend to focus on drug suppliers, whose lives are shaped by social exclusion, poverty, ethnic inequalities and cultures of violence. In order to nuance our understanding of the varied nature of lower-end drug markets, and the individuals who populate them, this article has focused on socio-economically mainstream young adults, whose supply practices often go unnoticed by the criminal justice system and the media. More specifically, the article has tried to shed light on socially included young adults’ pathways *into* and *out of* profit-generating drug supply.

Contrary to the pusher stereotype, which suggests that drug sellers are vicious, greedy and driven by conscious profit-oriented decisions (Coomber, 2006, 2010), we have argued that the concept of ‘drift’ is useful to explore the fluid and gradual movements between conventional social worlds and profit-generating drug supply. We found that many of our participants drifted into drug sales due to social concerns such as wanting to help friends or a boyfriend, or due to a desire for peer group recognition or adventure. To the extent that money did play a role, profits were most often relatively small, and often used to subsidise participants’ own drug use, to finance nightlife revelling, or to pay for everyday necessities. While most of our participants can be described as ‘light sellers’, in that their selling practices were sporadic, and only involved smaller amounts of drugs, a smaller group of participants can be described as ‘moderate sellers’ in that their sales activities were more consistent and involved larger volumes of drugs. This latter category also included those

participants who experimented with online sales to strangers, or who occasionally assisted a boyfriend or friend with their 'organised' drug enterprise, for instance by weighing, packing or delivering drugs to customers. Since those involved in both 'light' and 'moderate' selling were often driven more by social than economic motives, and because their selling activities were sporadic or occasional rather than occupational, we argue that their selling practices can best be conceptualised as 'recreational drug sales' (Jacinto et al., 2008, p. 437). The notion of drug sales as 'recreational' captures the fact that for many of our participants, drug selling was experimental in nature; that it was a leisure activity; that it often took place in private settings; and that it did not seem to challenge participants' involvement in the labour market/educational system or their identities as 'respectable' citizens. Furthermore, while much drug selling is still highly stigmatised, our findings nevertheless also suggest a growing normalisation – i.e., acceptance – of certain types of supply activities. Similar to studies showing how recreational drug users at times construct their drug use as safe and unproblematic, by counterposing it to stereotypical ideas about the 'addict' and 'addiction' (Plant & Plant, 1997), our participants drew distinctions between their own types of (recreational) drug selling and 'real' drug dealing, in turn constructing the former as not necessarily or not really deviant.

Only few of our participants moved into 'heavy drug sales', involving supply of large volumes and a more occupational approach. Those who did get involved in this type of selling often only did so for a relatively short time. In fact, a key finding of this study is that the selling careers of most of our participants were characterised by oscillations between moving into and out of drug sales (see also Adler, 1985), and in time, many drifted out of sales entirely. Most reduced or ceased their sales activities due to a combination of structural, relational and subjective processes, including growing fears of legal and/or social sanctions.

While fear of legal sanctions can reduce the supply activities of socially included drug sellers (see Jacques & Allen, 2014), none of our participants had ever been caught supplying drugs by the police. Furthermore, our participants' involvement in drug sales did not seem to challenge their participation in the labour market/educational system. Our research thus confirms the finding from other studies, that socially included drug suppliers tend to go unnoticed. Not only are socially mainstream drug sellers, due to their privileged social status, their majority ethnic background, and their otherwise conventional lifestyles, often shielded from public stigmatisation, research also shows that while ethnic minority and marginalised groups often bear the burden of drug law enforcement, mainstream drugs sellers tend to be overlooked by criminal justice systems (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Jacques & Wright, 2015; Salinas, 2018; Askew & Salinas, 2019; Perrin et al., 2021). In Denmark, socially marginalised individuals, and especially those from an ethnic minority background, are also the ones particularly exposed to drug law enforcement (Houborg et al., 2016; Moeller, 2021), why the drug selling conducted by mainstream young people of ethnic majority background often go under the radar. Studying the 'hidden group' of socially included sellers is important because this enable us to move beyond the pusher stereotype, and to develop a more nuanced and less moralised understanding of individuals involved in drug supply. Furthermore, as argued by Askew and Salinas (2019) it might also help reduce the stigmas and stereotypes that often befall socio-economically marginalised drug suppliers, who are routinely policed and sanctioned. For instance, while profit motives might play a larger role in socio-economically marginalised individuals' pathways into drugs sales, it is likely that much of their drug sales is also best understood as 'recreational', insofar as it is sporadic and leisure-based in nature and often done to help friends or to fund one's own drug use.

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