

1

New developments and current debates in social drug research: an introduction

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Globalisation influences not only legitimate economic sectors, but also affects developments on the illicit drug market, including rapid shifts in smuggling routes and the supply of new – not (yet) controlled – drugs. Between 2008 and 2012 the annual number of new psychoactive substances ('legal highs') that had been observed (e.g. by law enforcement agencies) in Europe increased from 13 to 73 (EMCDDA/Europol, 2013). Often, these new drugs are produced outside Europe, particularly in China. Meanwhile globalisation also strongly shapes the dynamics in the market for classic drugs, especially cannabis. For decades, hashish and marijuana were imported from other parts of the world, but more recently we have witnessed domestic cannabis cultivation swiftly spreading all over Europe and beyond (Decorte, Potter, & Bouchard, 2011). In this development, globalisation manifests itself in the form of 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995) and the exchange of knowledge and experiences between cannabis users, both online (through social media and on drugs forums) and in real life contacts, plays a pivotal role.

Never before was it so easy for people to travel around, thanks to cheap flights both within and outside of Europe and the ever-growing 'open borders' within the continent. On holidays, during city trips, as exchange students etc. some come into contact with drugs, drug users and drug dealers – and this can lead to the introduction of new drugs, new connections and altered patterns of drug use back home. Furthermore globalisation introduces new and considerable migratory flows, not only within but also from outside Europe. One of the consequences is that drug treatment is confronted with immigrant drug users, which raises the question of whether specific treatment modalities for minority ethnic populations are needed.

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Recent years also show an almost exponential increase in the use of online data collection and analysis in social drug research, not just as a modernisation of classic quantitative methods (e.g. online surveys), but also of qualitative research (e.g. visual methods). Doubtless this development harbours great advantages and a host of new possibilities. Yet at the same time, the risk of unbridled enthusiasm for these methods presents itself, which may lead to 'blind spots' with regard to limitations and disadvantages.

Lastly, there is a growing attentiveness towards research ethics. Within drug research, the ethical roots primarily lie in the medical discipline. Gradually, in some European countries faster than in others, research ethic committees have come to play an important role in social drug research. But are their clinically and quantitatively oriented procedures and requirements sufficiently suited to the ethical themes and dilemmas of qualitative research?

In a rapidly changing world, the need for information increases accordingly. Here, then, emerges an important task for science, even more so in the light of the European endeavor for evidence-based drug policy. However, it is no simple task, if only because science and politics are so often separate domains, each with its own responsibilities and (professional) parlance. On the one hand, it challenges scientists to reach out to policy-makers by conducting research into politically relevant issues and by formulating their findings in the clearest language conceivable. On the other hand, it is justifiable to ask to what extent politics should determine the research agenda in terms of research themes, research questions and funding.

Researchers are not a homogenous community, but are part of different and often quite separate disciplines. In the field of drug research, some disciplines are mainly interested in the substances and their effects, or in the scientific evidence for specific treatment modalities. Every discipline provides bounded insights into the diverse and complex drugs phenomenon.

This book is confined to the contributions of social drug researchers. In addressing the themes mentioned above, the authors utilise different methods, mostly variations of qualitative research. Instead of the usual format of the European Society for Social Drug Research's format of the annual book – a smaller number of longer chapters about their own research or commentaries on issues in the drugs field – the choice has been made this year to incorporate a greater number of short contributions, in the form of 21 'snapshots', written by 29 social scientists (22 female, 7 male) who work in 11 different European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

Part 1 – Drug distribution

The classic image of the drugs trade is that of a pyramid: a tightly organised hierarchic top-down chain of command. A host of scientific studies have chal-

lenged this image, and many conclude that the great majority of illegal exchanges in western countries are carried out by numerous relatively small and often ephemeral enterprises (e.g. Zaitch, 2002). According to the American economist and drug market expert Reuter (1983), the dominant model of the illegal drug market is not organised, but 'disorganized crime'. This is because drug market actors are subject to constraints deriving from the illegal status of the products they sell. Mafia expert Paoli (2003) concluded that 'even southern Italian mafia families (...) set up short-term partnerships with some other mafia affiliates, or even non-members, to carry out illegal transactions' (p. 125).

Immense amounts of money circulate in the illicit drug trade, and status as well as prestige are of great importance to criminal entrepreneurs and gangs. In such a climate, violence is self-evident and the many casualties in the drug trade are its (silenced) witnesses. For this phenomenon, Goldstein (1985) introduced the concept of 'systemic violence', i.e. drug trafficking is embedded in existing violent subcultures and traditionally aggressive patterns of interaction within the system of drug distribution. However, the use of violence also poses a threat to the continued existence of the illicit drug trade. Reuter and Haaga (1989) have argued that in the western world, the use of violence plays a tangential role at the upper level, because it would attract the attention of the enforcement authorities. Similarly, in Part 1 of this book, from her case study on a cross-border upper-level cannabis dealing network (mainly operating in Austria, but also with ties to Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden), Tzanetakis concludes that members of the network would not use physical violence. Instead, building trust and loyalty helped avoid conflicts.

Descending to a more local level, in their study on the low-level drug distribution in Antwerp, D'Huyvetter and Decorte found that law enforcement data generate a biased picture towards (undocumented) immigrants dealing drugs (cocaine and heroin in particular) on the street in the inner city. Interviews with key informants (including drug users and dealers) revealed the important role of other actors in other neighbourhoods and other segments of the local drug market (cannabis, ecstasy and amphetamine), such as dealing by native Belgian dealers in the Antwerp nightlife scene and from private abodes. The Belgian researchers conclude that low-level dealers are mostly driven by profit. Their study sheds light on fluidity and resistance to policy influences among these low-level dealers. They suggest that due to the 'waterbed' characteristic of the market, policy-makers may want to 'nudge the local drug market towards its least unacceptable form', for their study shows that eradicating it would be very hard, if not impossible.

Zooming further in, both Bernard's research on socially integrated drug users in Frankfurt, and Potter & Osiniagova's study on social supply in hard drug markets in London take us into the world of the individual recreational drug user and the social supply networks they partake in. Both studies map the gradual scale between not-for-profit-suppliers who distribute drugs solely as a

‘favour to friends’ and the ‘real dealers’ (also mentioned in D’Huyvetter and Decorte’s study) who distribute drugs with the sole purpose of making a profit. In between these extremes sits an interesting group, that alternates between the social supply model and the real dealer stereotype as it suits them.

When we look at what connects the different levels, the latter group appears to form the link between the world as described by D’Huyvetter and Decorte, and the more cushioned, socially embedded drug users who try to avoid maintaining relationships with ‘real dealers’ and rely mostly on friends to supply them. This may also play a part in the fluidity of the local drug market, and why it is so resistant to local policy. Combined, these studies create an insight in the different levels of drug distribution networks as a whole, which opens up research venues into how they are linked and interact with one another. The links between the social supply and the low-level drug dealers may seem rather apparent, but how then does this connect to the upper-level drug dealing, and how does each level affect the others? Furthermore, which levels can be influenced by drug policies and how does that reverberate to the other levels? All levels are interconnected and mutually dependent, but the extent to which this interaction influences actors seems an issue for investigation and debate.

Part 2: Drug use and treatment among minority ethnic populations

Two questions form the background to all the contributions to this part of the book: is there a difference in drug use and misuse patterns between natives and immigrants and if so, should there be differentiated treatment programs tailored to the specific needs of both groups?

Tsiganou and Balourdos take a very critical stance, stating that, based on their data from Greece, any differences that might be discerned between the two groups can be traced back to structural parameters, rather than cultural characteristics and variables. They argue that the difference between native and immigrant drug users is not so very useful analytically, and therefore a goal of differential treatment based on ethnicity might not be constructive.

The Benschop and Oteo Pérez study on crack users in three Dutch cities is more descriptive in nature, and focuses on the question of whether or not there is a difference in use or misuse between native and immigrant users. Their conclusions, based on research amongst marginalised crack users, suggests that the differences between the two groups, if any, are very small indeed. Although they do not mention possible consequences of their study for treatment policies, it would seem illogical to argue in favour of differential treatment of natives and immigrants if there is no actual difference in their patterns of drug use and misuse.

Micha and Spyropoulou on the other hand, did find significant differences between immigrant and Greek drug users in their study, especially with regards

to drug use and risk behaviour. The professionals they interviewed highlighted the unequal access to treatment services. Based on their data, Micha and Spyropoulou argue in favour of differential treatment strategies for the two groups.

Lastly, Iliou and Tsantila state that immigrant drug users hold a dual devalued identity, that there are epidemiologic differences between native and immigrant drug users, and that this would imply diverse therapeutic needs. However, they tilt the discussion in a different direction by introducing data suggesting that immigrants use drugs in an effort to be socially included and follow native drug use patterns partly to deal with their devalued social identities. Does that mean that perhaps perceived social identity is a more important differentiating factor in drug use and misuse, and that being native or immigrant is only a part of that (perceived) identity? And if so, what ramifications could that have for the ideal of making drug treatments accessible to everyone?

Part 3: Science-policy nexus

If nothing else, the sheer number of contributions to this part compared to the other topics indicates that the science-policy nexus is a significant and topical issue. Although the contributions vary in research area and focus, some overarching themes can be discerned. Tieberghien's study on the interaction between science, policy and media in the Belgian drug debate confirms once more that scientific knowledge is only one, and not necessarily a dominant element in the complex process of policy-making. She also points out the ambiguous role of media coverage, which on the one hand can enhance the use of scientific knowledge in the policy-making process, yet due to its often rather incomplete presentation also facilitates the selective utilisation of scientific knowledge in the policy-making process.

Storbjörk's study follows a similar vein, describing how very little scientific evidence was used in the debate surrounding a proposed reform of the Swedish substance abuse treatment system. Furthermore, if scientific evidence was used, it was selectively utilised to support arguments both in favour of, and opposing the reform, in line with Tieberghien's findings. Pistos and Spiliopoulou add to this an analysis of European policy-makers' response to new psychoactive compounds or 'legal highs', which includes a call to action to the European Union Council to enhance monitoring and risk assessment, stimulate research into this new field and formulate quick responses based on the outcomes of such research. Theirs is a more direct appeal towards policy-makers to formulate responses based on scientific findings. By the same token, Gourgiotou's research into the use of scientific data on the social reintegration of drug addicts in the implementation of the EU drug strategy at national levels, stresses the importance of cooperation between researchers and policy-makers in all the stages of planning, implementation and evaluation of drug policies. Finally,

Springer's reflections on the science-policy nexus suggest ways to protect scientific knowledge from political interference, by means of copyright, independent funding and comprehensive conflict of interest statements in academic journals.

The recurring theme in these contributions is the complaint that policy-makers do not use scientific knowledge properly or enough in the process of policy making. Arguments are made for the need of intensive cooperation between researchers and policy-makers, as well as protective measures against the selective utilisation of scientific findings. These calls for action seem to be directed towards policy-makers, requiring them to make more effort to incorporate scientific knowledge into their policies in a way that is right in the eyes of the researchers, whilst at the same time the researchers should make an effort to make their publications less accessible for external parties. Yet cooperation and communication goes both ways, requiring effort on both sides. Why are policy-makers so disinclined to base their policies on scientific findings, and is that maybe not only due to the complex nature of the process of policy-making, but is also (at least in part) a consequence of the inaccessibility of scientific knowledge? Is it not all too easy to require policy-makers to correctly and carefully consider scientific knowledge in their policies when they have neither the background nor the tools to fully access and comprehend that knowledge?

Wouters views matters from a different angle. Instead of describing the prevalence of cannabis use and making a policy recommendation based on this, she evaluates the effects of raising the minimum age for visitors to coffee shops from 16 to 18 years in 1996 on the prevalence of cannabis use amongst 16 and 17 year-olds in Amsterdam from 1993 to 2007. Based on a logistic regression analysis, she concludes that demographic changes (i.e. more ethnic minority youth) rather than changes in policy appear to be the main cause of a downward trend in cannabis prevalence since the new coffee shop policy. This in turn raises questions on the effects of policy changes on drug prevalence, in particular for researchers who want to contribute to social change. They may ask themselves whether trying to influence policy is the most effective way of bringing about such change. This is clearly illustrated in the final chapter of this part of the book. With her study on the genesis of drug courts in Norway, Snertingdal also uses the evaluation approach. She, however, did not study specific policy changes, but rather the effects of the emergence of a therapeutic ethos in legal discourses. She concludes that the treatment programmes designed for the most severely marginalised users may not be accessible for this specific group, because they are often deemed untreatable. Thus, instead of being helped, they are marginalised even further.

Part 4: Research methods

In this section, two contributions discuss the ever-growing popularity of online data collection. Vlaemyntck weighs the pros and cons of virtual ethnography

and quantitative data collection for her research into social supply networks. Although she details the advantages elaborately (anonymity, balanced relationship between respondent and researcher, heightened speed and lower cost), she does conclude that online research methods are less useful in her particular study. Her main reasons are the difficulties with exploring social networks in depth and that many social supply studies rely on snowball sampling and referrals from respondents, which are very hard to obtain when using only online research methods. Taking both the benefits and constraints into account, Kalogeraki argues in favour of online mixed methods research designs, at least where school-based drug research is concerned. Certainly, online research methods can, under certain circumstances, be a valuable addition to more traditional approaches, but as Vlaemyneck's considerations show, they are not applicable to all social research topics. Furthermore, the rising popularity of online research methods raises the question to what extent these research designs are used as an addition to, or a substitution of more traditional methods. The great benefits of online research seem to lie in the enhanced speed and reduced effort and cost. Yet one of the foundations of many social research methods is the personal relationship between the researcher and the respondent, especially when using qualitative research methods. That relationship cannot be precisely reproduced when solely online methods are used. It would be wise to make optimal use of the opportunities provided by the new methodological paths that open up online, but preferably as an addition and not a substitution of field-based research methods.

With regard to Henriques' and Candeias' advocacy of using visual methods, especially photography, in addictions research, the main question raised is the extent to which the pictures are interpreted and explained by the respondents themselves. Of course, photographs can be an aid in interviews, triggering deeper reflection and further avenues of inquiry. On the other hand, if too large a proportion of the interpretation is done by the researchers, results become questionable, for although a picture may say more than a thousand words, it is also open to a thousand explanations of its meaning.

Part 5: Ethical dilemmas

In her research on the everyday life of daily cannabis users in Denmark, Kronbaek reflects critically on their personal motives to participate in the study. She describes how in her project, the methodological and ethical considerations were almost the reverse of the usual situation. This was due to the fact that her informants were not socially vulnerable, but socially included and wanted to change the stereotype of drug users as being associated with crime and marginality. These agendas influenced the stories they constructed, and according to Kronbaek they regarded her project and herself as an instrument in the attempt

to change the dominant stereotypes. Yet is this the prerogative of socially included drug users, or do all informants, including the more socially vulnerable, have a specific agenda when participating in a study, and how does this affect the construction of their stories? And even if the informants use the research project as a tool to change the stereotype, is the fact that they desire to do so and the ways in which they do so valuable new data? If anything, it requires the researcher to be very sensitive to the motives and agendas of their informants, for these may be a source of new information, as well as influence the information that has been provided.

O’Gorman and Rigoni point out the difficulties for qualitative researchers to obtain the approval of often more positivist-oriented research ethics committees (RECs). Both authors describe how the requirements imposed by these committees often interfere with qualitative and ethnographic research methodology, and make an appeal for more reflexivity. Rigoni does this by advocating honesty and openness during the research process and publication, and O’Gorman eloquently provides some suggestions for new research ethics protocols adopting a rights-based approach towards the research participants.

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Part 1

Drug distribution

2

A case study of upper-level dealing

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While 93% of research activities in Europe focus on the fields of understanding drug use and demand reduction, only 6% deal with the reduction of supply (Bühringer et al., 2009). Studies on upper-level drug networks and drug cartels have been conducted in the US and Latin American countries, but to a lesser extent in Europe. In order to address this research gap, the study reported here explored the organisational dynamics of upper-level drug dealing. This paper aims to give an insight into the operation of a network of upper-level dealers within the European Union. A qualitative case study was conducted on a network of 55 of these dealers who mainly operated in Austria, but also in Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden and Hungary.

Methods

The in-depth case study is based on three semi-structured interviews with an imprisoned man convicted of drug-dealing offences, three semi-structured interviews with experts from the Austrian Federal Criminal Agency (Department of Anti-Money Laundering, Drug-Related Crime and International Police Cooperation), and on legal files (including investigation records, phone tapping protocols, accusations, trial protocols and verdicts) on one upper-level drug dealing network.

The data were analysed with qualitative content analysis (QCA), a method suitable for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. Furthermore, the software programme MAXQDA-10 was used as a tool to organise the data. While building a coding frame for this study, a combination of deductive and inductive strategy was applied. Using the deductive approach, categories were derived from previous research on upper-level drug dealing (for example Dorn et al., 1992). The inductive approach used categories that were

derived from the interviews and legal files. The coding frame for the present study meets the quality standards for QCA. It can be considered reliable (error-free) to the extent that two independent coders agreed on assigning the units of coding during the pilot phase. Moreover, the coding frame shows high validity due to inductively and deductively generated categories, it was tested on a part of the material, and few units of coding were assigned to the residual categories. This analysis is the first qualitative research in the field of upper-level drug dealing for German-speaking countries.

Results

One of the core findings of the study is that members of the network would not use physical violence as a means of solving conflicts. Therefore, the thesis that violence is of little importance at the wholesale level of drug dealing (Reuter & Haaga, 1989) could be confirmed. It has been argued (by Reuter & Haaga, for example) that the use of violence plays a tangential role at the upper level, because it attracts the attention of the enforcement authorities, which has negative consequences for drug trafficking. According to the case study, one single incident of physical violence was recorded during a period of over a year. Several cases of threats were documented, however, because some members of the network were allegedly cheated by others. Furthermore, some carried guns for protecting consignments while selling hashish to bulk buyers (i.e. more than 10 kilos per transaction). However, these represent only a few violent incidents among a network of 55 members, who were involved in buying, smuggling and reselling 1.2 tons of hashish during the study period.

Building trust and loyalty helps avoid conflicts and every network member benefits from long-lasting business relationships. For example, as soon as the carriers (those who were recruited for transporting the hashish) proved themselves, they were introduced to the source of supply and were allowed to transport the drug to Spain or the Netherlands completely independently. These carriers were given higher compensation for their commitment.

Better understanding of the structure and operations of drug markets may contribute to improving the overall understanding of this complex area, as well as provide law enforcement agencies with information on where and when they should focus their activities.

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3

Low-level drug distribution in Antwerp: a case study

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From February 2012 to June 2013, we carried out a case study regarding a specific segment of the local drug market: the low-level drug distribution of marihuana, hashish, cocaine, heroin, ecstasy and amphetamine. The study was commissioned by the city of Antwerp in order to support the local drug policy with focused empirical data, alongside a general drug monitoring system that has been ongoing for five years. In line with the federal drug policy programme, tackling drug trafficking and dealing is an important pillar of the drug policy agenda in Antwerp. While studies often focus on the demand side of the illegal drug market, little is known about the supply side, interactions between drug users and buyers, and the (intentional and unintentional) impact of policy strategies. Furthermore, local drug markets are characterised by an increasing organisational complexity and a decreasing visibility. In order to support the local drug policy of Antwerp, this case study focused on three research questions:

Which 'profile' or common sociodemographic characteristics can be assigned to the low-level drug dealers in Antwerp?

How is the low-level drug market in Antwerp structured and how do low-level dealers operate?

How do local law enforcement agencies tackle low-level drug distribution in Antwerp and what are the (un)intended effects of their activities on the local drug dealers and on the local drug market in general?

In addition to providing local information, studies concerning the functioning of a low-level drug market in a specific neighbourhood also contribute to theoretical explanations of drug markets in general: they help us understand the dynamics of the phenomenon on a local level.

Methods

The methodology of this case study was based on the analysis of national and international literature concerning local drug market research. Information on low-level drug distribution in Antwerp was gathered in two phases. After an exploratory literature study, 144 police reports and 31 judicial files were analysed using qualitative and quantitative strategies. In a second phase, in-depth interviews with 29 key informants (professionals, drug users and low-level drug dealers) were conducted to explore the topic more profoundly and to fill in any gaps in the information. By also approaching low-level drug dealers (in custody) and giving them a voice, the insiders' perspective got the attention it deserved.

Results

Results were officially presented during a seminar in the fall of 2013 and a report of the research was published by the city administration. Previously, the existing expertise on low-level drug distribution in Antwerp was predominantly based on law enforcement data and focused mainly on (undocumented) immigrants dealing drugs on the street. Our study of police files reflected this, as more than 50% of the cases resulted from coordinated police interventions in the Central Station area, where the most vulnerable group of users and dealers are. However, our interviews revealed that other elements of drug distribution, such as that by native Belgian dealers in the Antwerp nightlife scene, and from private abodes, should not be underestimated.

There is no such thing as 'the Antwerp low-level drug dealer', and while the *Seefhoek*, an inner city neighbourhood with visible drug problems, has been believed to be the heart of the drug problem for many years, this study shows that every district has its own 'hot spots'. Whereas the inner city is known for its supply of cocaine, heroin and cannabis, districts on the outskirts of the city are associated with the distribution of cannabis, ecstasy and amphetamine. Low-level dealers are mostly driven by profit and are not discouraged by the recently intensified 'war on drugs' instigated by the former and current city councils.

Conclusions

The local drug market appears to be resistant to eradication: it seems to slip through every grasp of policy-making effort. Its adaptability is illustrated by trends such as the rise of mobile telephone use, the use of rental cars, the 'waterbed' characteristic (press down on one place and the water simply moves

to another), etc. Nudging the local drug market towards its least unacceptable form, rather than wanting to eradicate it completely, is the most important challenge. Recommendations in the research report include preventive measures, drug addiction treatment and repressive strategies. The importance of improved monitoring systems and independent scientific evaluation of local drug policies are also stressed.