

User-Dealers : harm reduction's forgotten people

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User-Dealers: Harm Reduction's Forgotten People

This paper focuses on the often neglected set of individuals who engage in both the use and selling of illicit drugs; user-dealers. It reports the findings of a qualitative study conducted among cocaine dealers operating in Parisian techno parties; highlighting the routes into and out of using-dealing, the particular risks faced by this population, and the need for health and criminal justice agencies to better understand and address these issues.

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The dealer, the drug, and the addiction; all these constructs are parts of the same social problem that has occupied the media, political and scientific classes for over half a century. It is a social problem with an exemplary «successful» career, according to the theory of Blumer,¹ who encourages researchers to focus on the underlying conditions of these constructs, their «process of collective definition», rather than on what they are assumed to be. That is what we will aim to do before moving on to the essential content of this paper, i.e. the risks that a class of user-dealers are exposed to, and the means to reduce these risks.

The mythical figure of dealer

During the large increase in drug use that was observed in the 70s, the debate was dominated by an epidemical metaphor. In this view, addiction is a disease, the drug is a pathogen and the dealer is a contamination vector. Logically, the preventive axis of the drug war had to warn populations as much against dealers as against drugs.

Now we have a better understanding of why the countless descriptions of dealers offered by the media never rely on surveys. These caricatures do not have the aim of describing reality, but are used simply to prevent an increase in drug use. All these portraits progressively shaped our collective unconscious and created a real stereotype of the dealer: systematically non-user, he waits for children leaving school, offers free first doses and cuts his marijuana with heroin.

As an object of unanimous aversion, dealers became a favourite theme of politicians in election campaigns; some dealers require life imprisonment and others the death penalty. In France, a few months before the presidential election of 1981, the Communist Party organised a demonstration with high media coverage under the windows of a suspected drug dealer. In Ireland, the IRA murdered a few dealers to ensure the support of the local population. Examples of this type are not rare, have a long history and can be found anywhere in the world. In 1976, T. Szasz² highlighted the political manipulation of the fear caused by dealers, the scapegoats for all drug problems. Speeches by American politicians were inspired by the epidemic metaphor to equate drug dealers with mosquitoes (vectors of malaria infection) or rats (vectors of the plague), which painfully reminded T. Szasz (a Jewish psychiatrist forced to flee Hungary during the war) of Nazi propaganda.

In 2006, exactly thirty years later, Ross Coomber published a book³ in which he led counter-inquiries against stories about dealers that received widespread media coverage, regarding the addition of addictive or noxious substances, the distribution of freebies, etc. As well as examining the gap between the reality and the stereotype, this book also shows its persistence in our time, including in genuine sources.

Going against this vision of dealers is difficult, and this kind of research is very rare. As a tribute, I quote a rather old study by Blum (1977),⁴ truly a pioneer due to the size of the sample surveyed (450 dealers), but mostly because I believe it is the first to have examined the risks faced by dealers. Its results were clear: two thirds of interviewed dealers had noted serious changes in other dealers they knew, (addiction, mental illness, death...) almost half said it was difficult to leave the trade and 40% were concerned about their own drug use.

Nothing very surprising there: those who work with drug users are well aware that dealing is a highly destructive practice and drug use is widespread among dealers. The boundary between dealing and using is thinner than it appears. However, drug management policies are often based on this distinction.

User-dealer, a poorly conceptualized notion

Treating users and curbing traffickers is the general idea of the drugs laws of most occidental societies. User-dealers therefore appear to be a borderline case, a headache for legislators and judges. In France the law simply does not mention them; «La Cour de Cassation [the highest Court of Appeal] gives judges the power to determine the punishment appropriate to the situation»⁵ and, «in the end, the penalty for drug use/resell has been largely left for local evaluation».⁶

«Local evaluation» is also what comes to mind when we look at the current acceptance of the term «usager-revendeur» (user-dealer), often used by the French media to designate resellers who are granted mitigating circumstances, such as a low volume of sold quantities and a high level of dependence. However further analysis suggests the influence of other criteria: ethnicity, social integration, forms of reselling etc. It seems that the user-dealer classification reflects more of the values of the observer than an objective reality.

Nevertheless the conceptualization of this idea is not difficult. Just refer to the two terms that compose it: a drug user-dealer is any individual who both uses and deals at least one (same) substance. This of course covers a very wide range and it could be objected that an importer of large quantities of drugs who is also a casual consumer is very different to a daily consumer who sometimes sells a few

grams to his friends. However, the need to group the various practices embraced by a concept does not necessarily cast doubt over its relevance. Bear in mind that drug use-resell cannot be studied as such: it is necessary to focus on more specific categories and then stay vigilant to the generalization of results.

A study on Parisian Techno parties cocaine dealers

The category studied here is precise and very specific: cocaine user-dealers in underground techno parties in Paris and its suburbs, with two additional inclusion criteria: they have experienced periods (a minimum of one month) of daily consumption and have handled volumes above 25g per week.⁷ The findings delivered here refer solely to this class and when speaking of drugs use-resell, it is only to those and their practice that we refer. Despite a guarantee of anonymity, only fifteen agreed to be recorded in an interview. Fifteen others were informally interviewed and five other interviews were conducted, at the prison from Nanterre, by M. Ruby.⁸ All those interviewed were French, between 25 to 35 years old, and most of them were ex-user-dealers. The study used a qualitative approach.

The first thing to note is that, as opposed to the cliché of dealer, a significant proportion of participants entered this practice by reselling. Often from working class backgrounds, these poverty-stricken young people are largely opposed to the use of «hard drugs» but they consider the possibility of helping a friend to sell his stock as a good way to earn some pocket money. When they develop forms of resale based on personal relationships, their selling activity pushes them to attend to their clients over the long term. Seeing consumers often experiencing few problems associated with their drug use can change their views. From an overestimation of the hazards of drug use, some shift to an underestimation. They can then begin to consume themselves, often initiated by their customers who have an interest in keeping good relations with them, and can sometimes open doors to a hitherto inaccessible world: getting high, parties, meetings; it is the start of «the bluff of money and cocaine».⁹

The other door is well known – when the individual starts by consuming drugs and then resells. One can imagine users heavily engaged in consumption, «forced» to sell in order to afford their dose, but for most interviewed witnesses the level of consumption or dependence did not seem to be a determining factor in the transition from use to resale. The research rather seems to relate entry into reselling to situational factors such as good access to quality and/or cheap drugs, or the position in the peer group. Indeed, the first act of resale is often made without profit, driven by a desire to provide a service to friends in search of drugs. It may be a small quantity taken from personal supplies, or «shopping» for a friend or group. The greater the difference between a consumer's access to drugs and that of his peers, then the greater the demand that will be submitted by them. The dealer is then playing a social intermediary role between suppliers and consumers.¹⁰

The more we sell the more reason we have to sell...

Once this first transaction has been made, it is quite possible that the friends will return for another «service». If they agree to do it again, the individual will gradually become the assigned dealer for his friends who will search less for another dealer since they already have one. This (having a dealer) will also expose them to their friends' requests, and some of them may in turn also enter into the market.

Probably due to the large number of socially integrated cocaine users who prefer to organize themselves in user-dealer networks rather than buy their drugs from strangers in risky places, and perhaps too because of the repression that often forces users to find new dealers, it seems that once a reseller is «officialized», potential customers are not lacking. Far away from the stereotype of the proselytizing dealer, all interviewed dealers related that they often refused customers. However, several mechanisms tended to make them agree to incre-

ase the volumes they handled. On one hand the successful realization of acts of resale tended to make them relatively more at risk of arrests and scams, and on the other hand they begin to consider the benefits they can get from the situation: an a priori upgraded status in drug user networks, and of course material benefits, in kind or in cash. In this regard, note that through the degression of costs, the structure of drug markets encourages an increase in quantities sold. Indeed, the savings are not insignificant: for a purchase of 50g of cocaine, there is a discount of about 10€ per gram. By removing 0.1g per gram sold, the seller can get 5g of cocaine and 500€ per 50g batch.

Some specific risks

Through financial or social benefits the period following entry into using and trafficking is often seen as a pleasant time. This feeling of being «like in a dream» is certainly related to the sharp increase in their drug use that occurs in this period. Indeed having drugs at home facilitates consumption, especially through the habit of testing drugs with clients. In addition, the financial break (very important for cocaine) disintegrates as the cost of consumption is perceived as a loss of income rather than as an actual expense. The various forms of dependence that dealers can develop act as a new factor pushing them to continue to resell, this time to finance their own consumption. Therefore, user-dealers are generally «strong» consumers. They are particularly affected by the various health risks associated with drug use, plus a number of risks specific to their practice, which can be classified into three broad categories:

Social Risks

If the status of user-dealer offers a strong position in drug user networks, reselling remains largely stigmatized. Dealers are therefore often rejected by their former friends, and sometimes by their family when they discover their activity. Their families may be reduced gradually to a court of profiteers who have a vested interest in making them continue dealing. This phenomenon significantly influences the social control by peers that Zinberg¹¹ highlighted. Financial income from dealing can render professional activities as non-essential, and since consumption and participation in many parties is hardly compatible with a regular timetable, a number of dealers gradually abandon their school activities and/or jobs. However, revenues from illegal trades are «dirty» and can often not be saved or used to pay rent. Shrouded under visible luxury and behind a phone that constantly rings, an unsuspected physical and emotional insecurity is often hidden.

Risks of theft and violence

Incomes generated by illegal activity are more prone to lust since, in case of problems, legal recourse is impossible. Thus theft, extortion, robberies and the like are common. These may be perpetrated by disappointed customers, specialists of this type of extortion, former associates, or unpaid suppliers. Indeed, many dealers buy and sell on credit and this entire system is based on the possible use of violence. Once a user-dealer is not paid by their customers, stopped by police, or has consumed too much of his stock, he is in trouble. Generally, suppliers offer two options: find the money (which may lead sellers to commit delinquent acts) or accept a new batch to resell to repay the initial credit. This leads many of those who have a compulsive relationship with the kind of drug they sell to go from one batch to another without ever managing to refund their debt.

Judiciary risks

These are the most obvious risks, universally feared by user-dealers; justice does not take this offense lightly. This research did not address the reality of judicial practice (for reasons of data access) but it is highly probable that the law particularly affects the most dependent (and the most likely to reoffend) and the most precarious. It is also difficult to determine how much of the duty of care is deli-



Fig. 1: Information pamphlet Deal – Conso.

vered. However a large number of interviewed witnesses had been in contact with the health system.

Outputs

For some, this contact with the health system was following a court-ordered treatment, for others it was through personal endeavor. Indeed, the various risks mentioned here inevitably end up causing user-dealers some serious problems. After a few years a certain fatigue sets in, and a new look at practice is instigated: they feel the urge to stop and resume a normal life. Unfortunately, this is when troubles start because the first step is stopping consumption and thus overcoming the dependencies the individual may have developed. It also means stopping selling and possibly being abandoned by many «friends», being deprived of a source of income, and for those who were not legally employed, the realisation that employment opportunities are limited by gaps on the curriculum vitae or a criminal record. Ex-user-dealers therefore may have to accept jobs which, by way of contrast, appear more difficult and poorly paid than they really are. This period is often very bleak, so relapses are frequent. Experienced as failures, these new marriages with use-resell do not result in a new honeymoon but rather in periods prone to self-destructive behaviour (over-consumption, suicide bids, police provocations, fights...). However, after a few attempts, most seem to move away from using and trafficking, generally «motivated» by a new life project (for example, a new relationship).

User-resellers and system of care

If user-dealers often leave this practice due to being motivated by a new life project, however, we can still say they stop alone. Many participants had been in contact with specialized workers, but most had been disappointed by these meetings. Although this data has to be put into perspective as the numbers involved are limited and biases may exist, it remains interesting that for all interviewed user-dealers, during these meetings the specificities of their practices were not left out of the account. Moreover their selling activities had been completely removed in favor of sole drug use. In defence of caregivers, we must say that most of the time user-dealers come into the health system in order to stop using they don't broach the theme of resell themselves because it is too stigmatized. However in the light of the importance of this dimension in their experience, one can still regret that specialized workers did not broach the subject of resell.

It is equally regrettable that traditional prevention and harm reduction policies did not seize upon this theme. Indeed, despite the numerous risks expounded above, which appear as potential levers for preventive actions and which have been studied in many sociological research studies since the 1990s, it seems that in France as in Europe, no pamphlet, training or tool has ever focused on this practice. Several hypotheses can be developed to explain this desert: a disposition effect that pushes health actors to consider retailers as vectors and not targets of action; the desire to keep a sharp distinction between dealers and users to protect them; or the proximity to the drug dealer's stereotype which excludes all non-repressive action.

An information pamphlet about use-resell harms

To overcome this deficiency and to test these different hypotheses, research was conducted including an active dimension: this was the publication of the information pamphlet, Deal – Conso, about the specific harms of user-dealing (see Figure 1). Supported by a night-life harm reduction association (Technoplus), this project allowed us to show that the main difficulties are actually of a legal nature. According to lawyers consulted, the topic is extremely sensitive and, in the light of their differences of opinion, it seems very difficult to determine what it is possible to say and what is not. The challenge is even more important because justice operates with regard to judicial precedents and so a lost proceeding could close the door to other actions.

After two and a half years of writing work and after JM Priez agreed to assume the leadership of publication, Technoplus has decided to edit it. It is now distributed by interventionists. We now have the need to evaluate returns on this new tool. Your input would be welcome. It is available free from Technoplus (www.technoplus.org).•

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Endnotes

- 1 Cf. Blumer 1971. In the article «social problem as collective behaviours», he develops the theory that the father of symbolic interactionism wonders about the relevance of sociological objects as concepts created collectively by actors with divergent interests and angles of vision (mass media, politicians, social actors etc.).
- 2 Cf. Szasz 1974.
- 3 Cf. Coomber 2006.
- 4 Cf. Blum 1977.
- 5 Cf. Caballero/Bisioux 2000.
- 6 Cf. Barré 2008.
- 7 The study was conducted from 2007 to 2009 under the direction of Michel Joubert, professor of sociology at the University of Paris VIII.
- 8 A Psychologist who work in the prison of Nanterre, Paris, France.
- 9 Cf. Sélleret 2007.
- 10 Cf. Nouguez 2003.
- 11 Cf. Zinberg 1986.

