

Dealing with Gender: Unpacking the Variations of Women's Experiences in the Illegal Drug Economy

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Summary

In this dissertation, I investigate the experiences and social positions of women who participate in the illegal drug economy in Norway. I focus particularly on women who are dealing in the upper echelons of the drug market, which represents a scarcely investigated topic in sociological and criminological scholarship. A key theoretical contribution of the dissertation is its analyses of gender in crime settings through a focus on intra-gender variations in women's experiences, including factors contributing to this variation and its consequences. As such, I offer further evidence of the limitations associated with the dichotomous treatment of gender. The analyses rely on in-depth interviews that I conducted with 32 women involved as dealers and users in Norway's hard drug market, most of whom reported amphetamines as their primary drug, both for dealing and using. I interviewed 30 women in prison and two in their private homes, in several cases multiple times, and I systematically analyzed the resulting interview data in correspondence with methods of grounded theory.

Like most criminal markets, the hard drug economy is dominated by men and exhibits gender-stratified organization supported by heavily masculine "rules of the game." Such circumstances make gender a primary concern for people navigating within the drug economy, and as a result, women's gender performances become particularly complex, given the additional gendered stigma applied to women criminals. A chief theme of the dissertation is to understand women's navigations, within the drug economy in particular and within their lives more generally. By describing the variations of experiences and social positions among women who deal drugs, I illuminate the ways in which women give meaning to their involvement in the drug economy as users and as dealers, not only in the context of drug sales, but also in other domains of their lives. Ultimately, I show how social positioning and social context shape their experiences.

The dissertation consists of an introduction that elaborates upon the theoretical perspectives from which I draw, and the methodology employed in the four journal articles that constitute the primary body of the dissertation.

Article 1, titled “Dealing with a Gendered Economy: Female Drug Dealers and Street Capital,” coauthored with Sveinung Sandberg and published in the *European Journal of Criminology*, thematizes the gendered organization of the drug economy, as well as the specific strategies women draw upon in their market adaptations. The article provides insights into organizational and cultural adaptations within gender-stratified criminal markets.

Article 2, titled “Women’s Gender Performances and Cultural Heterogeneity in the Illegal Drug Economy” and published in *Criminology*, expands upon Article 1 by emphasizing the importance of gender performance in male-dominated criminal markets. I present four predominant patterns in which women dealers enact their gendered identities while navigating the drug economy, as well as show how various gender performances stem from women’s cultural repertoires, which are linked to their backgrounds and are mutually constitutive of their positions in the drug market hierarchy. The article offers new insights into ways of conceiving gender and culture in criminal markets.

Article 3, titled “Motherhood Identities Among Women Who Use and Deal Illegal Drugs” and under review (revise and resubmit) at *Gender & Society*, thematizes the extent to which motherhood forms part of the identities of women drug dealers who have children. I describe how gender performances, as well as the women’s place in the drug economy, pattern motherhood identities. The article offers new insights into ways of conceiving motherhood and its role among women involved with illegal drugs.

Article 4, titled “‘It’s Not Just the Drugs That Are Difficult to Quit’: Women’s Drug Dealing as a Source of Empowerment and its Implications for Crime Persistence,” coauthored with Jody Miller and submitted to *Theoretical Criminology*, thematizes empowerment through crime. Although the sample of women in the study was heterogeneous, the women could be divided into two clusters according to whether they demonstrated aspects of psychological empowerment in the drug economy. Whereas scholars often frame difficulties with desistance as stemming from drug addiction and the disempowerment that results, we show that empowerment within the drug economy can contribute to persistence in crime as well. As such, the article represents a theoretical contribution to current understandings of crime persistence and desistance.

With systematic analyses of empirical data, the dissertation contributes to theoretical development in the field of gender and crime. Across the four articles, I highlight greater nuance in the gendered experiences of women offenders than what has tended to dominate in scholarship on women and crime. In unpacking variations within gender to show significantly more complexity among women than gender dualism allows us to recognize, I highlight such

variations by investigating gender within different organizational and social contexts, as well as across multiple domains (i.e., drug market organization, cultural adaptations, motherhood, and social psychological factors). Altogether, I reveal how women's backgrounds, social positioning, and social context shape variations in their experiences and, in the process, identify the consequences, especially in terms of drug market success or marginalization and crime persistence.