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Article

Pathways to Drug Dealing in the Middle and Upper Classes: Early Marginalization, Relative Disadvantage and Countercultural Opposition

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Drug dealing is widespread in all sectors of society but is still studied predominantly in disadvantaged urban areas. We identify three main pathways to drug dealing based on qualitative interviews with middle- and upper-class individuals in Oslo, Norway. First, problems in the family and school and a lack of belonging in affluent neighbourhoods intersected with drug use and eventually led to recruitment into the illegal drug economy. Second, criminal entrepreneurship developed among relatively disadvantaged people who dealt drugs in an affluent low-risk context. Third, dealing emerged from involvement in drug liberalization and medical marihuana countercultures. The first pathway is similar to trajectories in disadvantaged urban areas, while the others reveal the importance of studying drug dealing in the upper layers of society.

KEY WORDS: drug dealing, dealer, upper-middle class, criminal pathway, cannabis, subculture

INTRODUCTION

Oslo is the capital and largest city of Norway. As in the other Nordic countries, citizens of Norway generally enjoy a high standard of living, and there is a high degree of equality and trust in societal institutions. Nevertheless, socioeconomic differences are still prominent. The most pronounced differences are between the prosperous western part of the city and the less affluent eastern parts (Haandrikman et al. 2021). The drug-dealing locations are divided along these same socioeconomic lines. The open drug scenes and drug markets are situated in the eastern inner-city areas, and there are also large hidden and private drug markets in the western parts. Recent survey data show that the use of illegal drugs such as cannabis is markedly higher in the city's west end (Pedersen and Bakken 2016) and that there has been a substantial increase in

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the availability and use of illegal drugs in these areas (Pedersen et al. 2019). As in international research, studies on drugs in Norway have focused on the disadvantaged urban areas, yet there is little knowledge about the drug economy fuelling society's elite.

The people selling drugs in this study were largely white, middle or upper class and had grown up in some of the most affluent communities of Oslo. Their parents were lawyers, professors, teachers and directors; as such, most research participants came from backgrounds of considerable cultural and economic capital. Given their privileged backgrounds, we ask why they still got involved in drug dealing. Despite the vast number of studies on illegal drug dealing, there are almost no empirical studies on white middle-class people dealing illegal drugs. The few who exist have emerged from the United States (e.g. Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; Jacques and Wright 2015) and have emphasized the various ways in which privilege imbues pathways to committing drug offenses. Our study expands such portrayals, showing that a relative social marginalization and a relative economic disadvantage, and an outsider status, also play a role in understanding drug dealing in privileged contexts. That is, while participants were privileged, social and psychological problems, economic disadvantage and feeling like an outsider influenced decisions leading to offending. Importantly, we will show how these relative disadvantages are intimately tied to their dual social position as privileged drug offenders. For while they experienced forms of marginality akin to those of disenfranchised populations, they did so within the confines of a low-risk environment less prone to police attention and violent victimization and with ample opportunity to distribute illegal drugs to affluent peers.

Throughout our analysis of pathways to drug offenses, we draw on understandings from life-course criminology, which combines lines of development such as work life or crime involvement during transitions such as family break up or entering a first job, to look at turning points or changes in the life course (Laub and Sampson 1993: 304). This article demonstrates that adaptation to such changes may lead to different life-course trajectories and is contingent on drug subcultural competencies and membership, as they are mediated by both 'prevailing situational and subcultural conditions' (Jacobs and Wright 1999: 150). We will show this by exploring the biographical details of the life trajectories of middle and upper class people involved in the illegal drug economy.

STREET CULTURE AND DRUG COUNTERCULTURES

Two cultures are important to understand pathways to drug dealing in this study: a street subculture and a more political counterculture of drug policy reform and medical marihuana. We distinguish between subcultures and countercultures based on the explicit rejection of mainstream society, but they share many characteristics, and the borders between them are blurry. Scholars have described subcultures as comprised of groups of people characterized by being nonnormative or marginal through their particular interests and practices (Gelder 2005). Early conceptualizations of subcultures focused on the concept of deviance (Becker 1963) and later studies on countercultural resistance (Hall and Jefferson 1976) when describing marginal groups relation to the broader society. As such, both subcultures and countercultures have been markers of difference and rebellion. Importantly, these are not homogenous groups (e.g. Fine and Kleinman 1979). Indeed, people are usually members of several groups and cultures at the same time and across time, and individuals adhere to subcultures and countercultures with varying degrees of involvement and intensity (Bennett 1999).

Today, scholars increasingly question the postulated sharp divide between the subcultural, the countercultural and the mainstream. For instance, traders and bankers may practice rugged masculinity and engage in conspicuous consumption, much like adherents to a violent street culture (Ilan 2015: 35). So, while street culture has historically been viewed as a marginalized population's response to structural disadvantage (e.g. Bourgois 2003; Anderson 2000) and has often been linked to practices and styles associated with marginalized populations, it is also 'rife with complexities, contradictions and dissonance' (Ilan 2015: 9). People adhere to all cultures differently, adopting some elements while discarding others. Some scholars, therefore, propose that street culture is better understood as a continuum or a spectrum (Gunter 2008; Daniel 2012). At one end of the spectrum, we may find a youthful search for autonomy that is not particularly involved with serious crime; at the other end, there are criminal lifestyles based on dealing, stealing and the willingness to deploy violence (Ilan 2015: 170).

The same goes for drug countercultures; while some counterculture members devote significant parts of their lives to alternative lifestyles and aim for cultural homology, for others, it entails less space and commitment and can be viewed as a type of experimentation with identity, political engagement or associated with particular phases of life. Cannabis use in Norway and other Western countries has been connected to the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Suchman 1968; Booth 2005; Sandberg 2013). As such, drug countercultures involving drug legalization and medical marihuana, not unlike street culture and other subcultures, signal opposition to the mainstream. However, while subcultures and countercultures depend on distance from the mainstream, they also depend on the 'establishment' to distinguish themselves (Jancovich 2002). They may identify themselves as 'hip' and others as 'mainstream' as a way of solidifying their subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), or they may emphasize the rejection of society's authoritarian and powerful institutions (Hall and Jefferson 1976).

While being involved in these subcultures and countercultures was an important component of pathways to drug dealing in our study, it is important to see how belonging to these worlds was a temporary, fluid and flexible (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004) 'tool kit' (Swidler 1986) for young people when they navigate their lives and the drug economy (Sandberg 2012). For instance, depending on where they were in their life trajectory, participants drew more heavily on one cultural script as opposed to the other. Sometimes they would draw upon the traditional elements of street cultures, such as dealing for profit, conspicuously consuming illegal drugs or using violence as part of their cultural repertoire, while at other times, they were more fully devoted to drug countercultures, emphasized the non-commercial side of the cannabis culture, or joining user organization to advocate for drug decriminalization and legalization. All, however, were continuously negotiating, responding and shaping the cultural surroundings of their drug use—and dealing.

DRUG DEALING

Most studies on low- to mid-level drug dealing have focused on open drug markets among low-income minority populations in the United States (e.g. Bourgois 2003), Germany (e.g. Bucerius 2014) and Scandinavia (e.g. Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). These are groups whose pathways to dealing are often affected by social and structural *disadvantages*. The combination of myths surrounding drug 'dealers', including those embedded in historical processes of demonization of traffickers and people with ethnic minority backgrounds (Coomber 2006), and the visibility of open drug markets to media and scholars, have arguably contributed to this cumulative focus on socially and economically disadvantaged people. However, scholarly research has recently expanded its scope to also include dealing among ethnic majority traffickers and/or those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (e.g. Salinas 2018). These studies show markets and people who use and deal who are at various times and to varying degrees at a social advantage due to their privileged status either within drug hierarchies or because of their ethnic and socioeconomic background.

A few studies on middle- and upper-class people dealing in the United States exemplify this. The key concept is *privilege* and the ways in which their backgrounds mediate all facets of involvement in the illegal drug economy. One study on people dealing in a suburb outside of Atlanta, Georgia, shows that it is the pursuit of 'coolness' that primarily entices these suburban dwellers to enter the illegal drug economy (Jacques and Wright 2015). These people also often emulate parents' conventional success with their dealing lifestyles. Finally, their dealing came as an extension of their recreational drug use and was primarily to friends and for little profit. These findings show many similarities with studies highlighting how the relative normalization of recreational drug use is linked to 'social supply'—drug distribution to friends and acquaintances for little or no profit (e.g. Coomber et al. 2016). Importantly, scholars argue that while social supply may develop into 'real' dealing it has been shown to retain its values of friendship and trust (Taylor and Potter 2013).

Given that drug use and drug dealing is relatively normalized in many milieus, these studies highlight how the subcultural, countercultural and mainstream blur. For instance, people who deal in these environments undoubtedly need to attain a certain level of subcultural capital, such as knowing how to acquire a supply, who to sell to and how to avoid risk (Jacques and Wright 2015). However, these milieus are also conventional, in that mainstream markers of success predominate, and solidarity and a sharing culture is pronounced (Jacques and Wright 2015). Drug dealing, which traditionally is understood to be primarily connected to a violent street culture, become in these instances also connected to mainstream forms of recreational drug use and a youthful search for autonomy (e.g. Coomber and Moyle 2014; Ilan 2015). However, the lines between the subcultural and the mainstream also blur in that both disadvantaged inner-city youths and white middle-class youth engage in dealing to consume illegal drugs and acquire fashionable products such as clothes, shoes and jewellery (Jacques and Wright 2015: 140).

Like Jacques and Wright (2015) study of suburban people dealing, Mohamed and Fritsvold (2010) study show how middle- and upper-class students servicing a university campus in the US state of California began selling drugs in order to fund an extravagant lifestyle and to offset the cost of their drug habit. Not unlike the suburban people dealing emulation of the conventional success of their parents, these university students dealing saw their participation in the illegal drug economy as a way of gaining valuable business skills that they could later use in legitimate enterprises. Many were business majors in college and, because campus police showed little interest in enforcing drug laws, were rarely punished for their illegal activities by the criminal justice system (Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010). These studies highlight how the relative normalization of recreational drug use and distribution contribute to blurring the lines of the subcultural and the mainstream (e.g. Coomber and Moyle 2014).

The handful of studies on people with middle- and upper-class backgrounds who sell drugs have focused on how pathways to offending are mediated by privileged backgrounds. In the current study, we highlight the *differences* among those living in affluent communities who become involved in the business of drug dealing. Although the participants in this study were privileged in many ways, there were also several forms of relative marginalization and cultural differences at play. That is, while white and from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, research participants still suffered social and psychological problems such as family disruption and drug abuse, many felt at an economic disadvantage compared to some of their most affluent peers, and several experienced being outsiders in their background milieus, particularly as it related to consumption of cannabis, a substance still tied to stigmatization. Throughout, we emphasize the importance of this type of relative marginality, disadvantage and outsider position to understand these privileged young people's subcultural attachment and involvement in the illegal drug economy.

METHODS

We obtained data for the analysis through in-depth interviews with 33 men and one woman who had experienced dealing illegal drugs in Oslo, Norway. Fourteen participants were in their mid-20s and early 30s, and 20 were in their late teens and early 20s. Most of the participants had gone to school in west end neighbourhoods, grown up there or both. Moreover, the context of their dealing was primarily the west end of Oslo and its affluent population. They all shared similar backgrounds and experiences, and many were from some of the same extended social networks. Several were from the upper class (e.g. children of professors, directors), most were from the upper-middle class (e.g. children of consultants, upper- and lower-secondary school teachers, mid- to high-level managers and executives) and a few came from lower-middle-class backgrounds (e.g. children of preschool and primary school teachers, office clerks). All participants had sold cannabis and other illegal drugs, and their participation in the illegal drug economy ranged from what we describe as the lower to the mid-level (for details of this classification, see Shammas et al. 2014: 597).

Interviews were usually 1–3 hours in length and took place either at the participant's home, the first author's home, or outside in the urban environment, such as in parks or at or near the University of Oslo. The first author approached the field from two angles: First, by accompanying staff working with youth and in drug crime prevention in the west end. Hanging out with them and conducting observations resulted in a better understanding of youth culture and drug-related problems on the west end. He was able to recruit 10 participants who had experience using and dealing drugs through this part of the fieldwork. The remaining 24 participants were recruited through his own and his friends' social networks in Oslo. The location of the interviews influences meaning making, shaping power and positionality in relation to the things, places and people discussed in the interview (Elwood and Martin 2000). In an attempt to mitigate some of the inherent power imbalance, the first author let the participants decide where they would prefer to carry out the interviews. Informal conversation, a walk and some brief hanging out often prefaced the interviews, allowing the first author to build trust and create a more comfortable interview situation.

Researchers' backgrounds and life experiences influence how we interact with research participants and how they relate to us (Shaw et al. 2020). The first author grew up and attended school in the same west end areas where he was conducting fieldwork and where the research participants had also grown up and gone to school. He is from an upper-class background similar to that of several of the research participants (based on ORDC criteria; see Hansen et al. 2009). As a result, he had considerable knowledge of the social worlds of the neighbourhoods and people he studied and shared many of the same characteristics of the people he met. This may be why he was able to gain access to research participants. Having a similar class background as that of your research participants is often assumed to engender empathy on the part of the interviewer, resulting in research participants opening up and feeling more comfortable. However, some question this assumption, arguing that a shared class position does not necessarily equate to similar life experiences (Mellor et al. 2014). Instead of thinking of researcher positionality in a dichotomous insider–outsider manner, the first author found himself on a continuum, sharing some characteristics and experiences with some of the participants but never all with any one particular interviewee (Carling et al. 2014).

Informed consent was secured prior to each interview. Interviews were semistructured and informal and focused on participants' life stories and several broad themes (e.g. upbringing, experiences in school, drug use and drug dealing), which allowed them to speak in their own words and the researcher to focus on the research questions central to the study. This was especially fruitful for gathering information about the process through which the participants were introduced to partying and illegal drugs and to the subsequent turn toward drug dealing. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. After that, they were coded in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12. The code with the most references was the one focused on pathways to drug dealing. We eventually split this code into three channels: marginalized, entrepreneurial and idealist. All three codes included several other subcodes, for example, peer delinquency, risk/reward and antiauthoritarianism, reflecting the distinctiveness of the three pathways. To protect participants' identities, we created pseudonyms and refrained from divulging information that might otherwise identify them.

PATHWAYS TO DRUG DEALING

In this section, we describe three trajectories to lower- and mid-level drug dealing in middle and upper class segments of society. In the first two pathways, social marginalization and economic deprivation combine with street cultural adherence, whereas in the third pathway, feeling like an outsider connects to countercultural opposition to produce trajectories to drug dealing. We illustrate these pathways by presenting three participants in more detail—Jacob, David and Matthew—before including more participants and describing the pathways in more general terms.

Jacob

Jacob's trajectory to low- and mid-level dealing was linked to early socioeconomic marginalization. He came from a family plagued by alcohol problems. Parental substance use or abuse is one mechanism found to dramatically increase the likelihood of drug dealing (Little and Steinberg 2006). From an early age, he developed trouble at school and gradually became part of a group of peers involved in delinquency and minor crime. 'My parents were alcoholics', Jacob said. As a result, he did not want to be at home. However, he early ran into problems at school as well. 'I fell out of school early…I had a lot of rage attacks. So, I could like wreck classrooms. Break windows. Bite teachers'. School authorities reacted by giving him detention, but to no avail. He subsequently found a greater sense of belonging among some of the 'older guys' in the neighbourhood who were attending a school for delinquent youth close to where he lived. They introduced him to cannabis and eventually recruited him into the lower levels of the illegal drug economy:

> The way it started for me was essentially that I was smoking with the older guys. I started early. So it was also natural that I got the connections first. I could get it [cannabis to friends], I could charge a bit extra. They [kids his age] couldn't roll [a joint] for example. I could roll and sell joints right. And then it just snowballed from there. If you like come and pick up a bag of weed three times a week to pass it to your buddies, eventually they'll ask you, 'why don't you just buy fifty grams like, and give me five and a half thousand when you've got it?' So I was just like, 'yeah, why not?' And then the ball is rolling.

His role as someone who had the right connections afforded Jacob the opportunity to start dealing to friends at the lower levels of the illegal drug economy. He sold drugs in west end neighbourhoods close to where he lived; however, by the time he was 16 and had entered high school on Oslo's east end, his dealing had become more serious. 'I just had people pass on my phone number. Eventually people started driving in from East Point, Garver Park'. Around this time in his life, Jacob was 'always active' [dealing], operating upward of three drug phones simultaneously, and could 'sell for ten thousand kroner [ca. £850] every day'.

Unfortunately, his early and sustained street-level drug dealing left him open to contact with police. 'They try and rough you up early to like deter you,' Jacob said. 'It's been deterring in some ways but probably not the ways they want it to be. More like paranoia, and to hell with them. You don't want to meet police, but it hasn't stopped me from doing anything'. Jacob's stories of interactions with police were reminiscent of his early interactions with other authority figures, such as teachers and child protective service agents, where he would have a hard time controlling his emotions, sometimes lashing out verbally and physically. In this pathway, encounters with the police were regarded as unavoidable and as part of the game. 'Most of what has made me go crazy throughout my life is when I feel unjustly treated', Jacob said of a time police officers arrested him for suspicion of drug dealing. He was clearly dealing drugs, but since the officers did not have any proof, Jacob felt like they were being unjust for detaining and holding him. The interaction led to him lashing out violently and the police fining him.

Early and repeated trouble at school and home had left Jacob open to find a greater sense of belonging among street-oriented peers. He had valued drug dealing for other reasons than just the money. Jacob explained: 'It was exciting. I had something to do, and everyone knows you and you develop relationships to a lot of different people'. By the time of our interview, Jacob, now 27, was still dealing cannabis on Oslo's west end. For all his trouble with police and customers 'stressing' him, dealing cannabis was something he knew how to do well, and it provided him with a heightened sense of self-worth.

Early marginalization

In our data, the most important indicators of what we have labelled the early marginalization pathway were parental substance use, instability in family relations such as divorce, and early problems in school, including restlessness, truancy, violent behaviour and peer-influenced offending, including recruitment into the lower levels of the illegal drug economy. Combined, these factors shaped their trajectories into drug use, crime and dealing. They developed a form of social marginality at an early age. That is, while from middle- and upper-class homes, psychosocial problems and early deviance were part of their pathways to offending. This relative marginality associated with drug dealing is not found in previous studies of white, middle-class youth, such as by Jacques and Wright (2015). Here, the emphasis is on how the communities in which participants grow up are peaceful and conventionally oriented, and there is relatively little focus on social marginalization.

In addition to parental substance abuse increasing the likelihood of drug dealing, recent studies (e.g. Bosick and Fomby 2018) indicate that family instability in adolescence disrupt transitional experiences (such as succeeding in school) and may be a risk factor for criminal involvement. Sasha, the only female participant in our study, started dealing after her parents' sudden divorce, when she struggled with 'anger and by extension aggressive behavior', explaining that it lowered the bar for 'stupid behavior'. Sasha started running away from home and soon gravitated toward the open heavy drug scene in the city centre of Oslo. She eventually developed a heroin problem. Although she later got clean after spending time in a closed facility for youth with substance problems, she soon after began dealing cannabis. She had decided to move as far away from her parent's neighbourhood as possible. She needed money, however, and had made connections with the leader of one of Oslo's infamous gangs, enabling her to start dealing and to make enough money to live on her own.

For participants on this pathway, trouble in school, thrill seeking, and peer-influenced delinquency usually interacted with parental substance abuse or family instability. Their pathways to offending were usually marked by early and extensive use of cannabis and other drugs, eventually resulting in them entering the lower levels of the illegal drug economy. Thus, their pathways connect to several of the values, dispositions and styles associated with street culture, including consumerism, distinction, hedonism and the visceral (Ilan 2015: 8–16). Compared to previous literature, participants in this early-marginalized pathway were reminiscent of the 'adventurers' of Dorn et al. (2005: iv): 'for whom a relatively high level of risk-taking is the norm for a variety of reasons—because they may feel they have little alternative (e.g. due to debt or coercion), or they may experience a sense of excitement yet do not fully understand the risks being run'.

Most importantly for our analysis, however, is that their relative exclusion and long history of social problems led them toward street culture (Bourgois 2003) and those pathways found in the more frequently researched group of disadvantaged urban minority populations (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Bucerius 2014; Marsh 2020). In this way, it serves as a reminder that, although people may at the outset seem to be different in terms of class, ethnicity, where they reside and overall social position, there may be important similarities in the reasons for their recruitment into the drug economy.

David

David had grown up and attended school in a wealthy area of Oslo's west end, and his parents were originally immigrants. He considered him and his family 'lucky' to be able to afford to live there because they had a middle-class background and had bought property in the area just before a strong increase in housing prices. Like most of our study participants, he inhabited a sort of in-between position socially. In David's case, this meant having a mix of 'immigrant' friends who were not socioeconomically advantaged and other friends whose parents were wealthy but who, importantly, did not fit the bill of the typical 'rich kid' from the neighbourhood. In this environment, having and being able to spend money was important. David had experimented with cannabis in junior high and wanted to start dealing in order to make money; however, he was afraid of the potential risks involved in entering the illegal drug economy. An important change in his perception that enabled him to start dealing took place when he enrolled in a high school with a high concentration of children of the economic elite:

> So when I enrolled in [high school] there were many friends of my friends who wanted to buy [cannabis]. So that made me think, 'this is kind of safe'. I have always thought about the potential of being robbed. I am not keen on that. So when I enrolled in [high school] which is like this huge school with all these rich kids it was pretty much jackpot you know.

Enrolling in a high school with children of the economic elite provided David with a steady and sought-after customer base. He had access to wealthy customers who often bought in bulk and did not argue over prices. David would recruit customers 'through friends' having people he knew 'vouch for' them. Dealing to friends of friends in this high school for children of the economic elite enabled David to inhabit a drug dealer's sweet spot, wherein he remained relatively insulated from the full scope of the problems associated with membership in the illegal drug economy, such as conflicts with other people dealing and subsequent victimization, while still reaping many of its benefits.

Understanding the basic structure of the illegal drug economy was another key factor affecting David's trajectory to drug dealing. In this respect, David differed from the more impulsive people dealing on the early marginalization pathway. He had quickly learned that it 'would be smart' if he and his friends pooled their money together, bought cannabis in larger quantities to diminish the price per gram, and subsequently sold it in smaller 'bags'. David and his friends also preferred to sell marihuana as opposed to hashish because they deemed it easier to check for drug quality and because marihuana buyers generally bought in larger quantities. They started buying fifty grams and sold it in 2.5-gram bags. Initially, they had used the surplus money, but quickly decided that they would focus on making this a lucrative endeavour, 'so when we got this money back, instead of using it we bought another hundred [grams]'. Finally, David would use the knowledge of the illegal drug economy he obtained from buying from other people dealing to incentivize his own customers to buy larger quantities at a lower price per gram, actively advertising his competitive prices. For David, this had an added benefit, namely that he would be able to sell his wares more quickly, lowering the chances of someone robbing him of his product or of the police catching him.

Criminal entrepreneurship and relative disadvantage

The participants who had taken this pathway to drug dealing carefully weighed the potential costs and benefits of dealing. John, dealing cannabis on the mid-level, talked about being street smart, autonomous and able to work situations to his advantage, all hallmarks of street cultural expression. However, these skills are, arguably, also similar to the mainstream values of success (Ilan 2015). For John and other research participants, customer relations were also important, as he incentivized buyers with competitive prices and rarely let people buy on credit. His own income was also an important part of his cost-benefit analysis. He rarely sold less than 2.5-gram 'bags' because he felt it wasn't worth his time to sell smaller amounts, and he rarely picked up more than 100 grams every two weeks to distribute because, 'I feel like there really isn't much I can use the money on anyways, like if I had gotten like 300,000 NOK cash like, what would I have done with it? It's not legal to use it on anything'. In addition, scaling up and selling drugs indiscriminately would attract unwanted attention and subject John to victimization and attention from police.

As such, findings from pathway two bear some likeness to Jacques and Wright (2015) study of suburban youth dealing drugs. In their study, drug dealing developed as a natural extension of cannabis use and to offset cost of their own drug consumption. They also mainly sold to affluent peers. Likewise, since they were young, and temporally barred from their parent's middle-class lifestyles and associated autonomy, they were motivated to deal drugs to acquire other cultural items, such as clothing. At the same time, and like our participants, the suburban youth were aware of the potential dangers of police catching them and did not scale up their drug dealing enterprise for these and other reasons (Jacques and Wright 2015).

The entrepreneurial trajectory to a drug-dealing 'sweet spot' was typically two-fold and interconnected. First, because research participants had grown up in wealthy neighbourhoods, there were many potential affluent customers (Pedersen et al. 2019; but see also Jarness et al. 2019). The availability of affluent customers in low-risk settings find resonance with past studies on white, middle class people dealing (Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; Jacques and Wright 2015). Second, and connected to the high demand for drugs, many developed an interest in dealing because they considered themselves as socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to many of their wealthier drug-buying peers. Like previous research some were legitimately employed and dealt as a 'sideline,' others were 'opportunistic irregulars' (Dorn et al. 1992), and most dealt to keep up with an expensive lifestyle around alcohol and drug use (Turner 2019).

Although from middle- and upper-class families, several participants had 'immigrant' backgrounds and, as a result, many felt at a disadvantage. Others came from less wealthy families. A participant explained how his friends felt like they had 'less opportunities'. Others echoed this general sentiment, explaining, 'I began doing it because I did not grow up with that much money and a lot of my buddies had lots of money. And so I just needed a solution'. Similarly, 'You get sick of seeing everyone getting anything they want, any clothes they want, and yeah it's the west end we are talking about you know'. To be sure, these were still middle-class youth, and perhaps they were not struggling to the point where they had to deal in order to survive. Nevertheless, it was their sense that they had less money and fewer opportunities than many of their peers that drove them to consider dealing drugs. This relative economic disadvantage is not found in previous studies on white, middle class people dealing illegal drugs (e.g. Jacques and Wright 2015) but is an important motivation for marginalized people involved in the illegal drug economy in disenfranchised communities (e.g. Bourgois 2003).

Transitions and turning points into adulthood have been shown to shape pathways into crime as well as the drug economy (Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 2005; Shammas et al. 2014: 604). This was the case for a subset of participants in this group. Pathways to criminal entrepreneurialism took place later in life and in conjunction with exiting high school and having to contend with either entering the university system or securing gainful employment. Some also used the little they had in terms of associations with street culture (Ilan 2015) as a resource to advance these endeavours. Previous research has shown that, given the choice of obtaining legitimate employment or entering the illegal drug market, people often choose the latter because of the potential for 'fast money' (VanNostrand and Tewksbury 1999: 65; Turner 2019: 113–7). The relative absence of police in this affluent context also played a role in the considerations of these drug entrepreneurs and served as a catalyst for their involvement in the drug economy.

Matthew

Matthew's trajectory to dealing was tied to a sense of idealism. He had started using cannabis around age 17. He had done exceedingly well in junior high school but became less motivated when he enrolled in one of Oslo's more competitive high schools. Matthew had grown up in an upper-class environment, where he was expected to go on to higher education, preferably in a prestigious field. He then enrolled in a business school in the UK. Although he had initially been excited about the opportunity of getting away from Oslo and having new adventures, he remembered the experiences as 'polarizing', in part because the values at the business school increasingly did not match his own.

However, he greatly treasured the sense of freedom that being in a new place afforded him, and felt, for the first time, that he did not have to be defined by his upper-class background milieu and associated expectations. He described this as a period when 'I could just find myself you know, right, who you really are'. An important shift in his life course took place when he also started meeting more like-minded people who had more of the 'vibe' he wanted in life and who, importantly, shared his growing interest in cannabis and other illegal drugs:

> A big part of that change in motivation and personality and stuff like that was a lot of it was because of drugs. Different drugs that I came across over there [in the UK] that changed my reality, my perspective a little bit. And like what you follow, and what is important.

When he returned to Oslo, the change in motivation and perspective that he had experienced while abroad clashed with his old friends. They were not receptive to his newfound interests and perspectives. Matthew felt ostracized and had a difficult time. He decided to move from the west end of Oslo to a part of the city centre associated with a more hipster lifestyle. He began pursuing art, continued his cannabis use, and also began experimenting with psychedelic drugs. It was around this time, with his new life in Oslo, that he began dealing cannabis and psychedelics:

> So it was very common that everyone in that environment has access to drugs. So I think I started, not with dealing but I think I started with 'helping' people get what they wanted. Through referring them to acquaintances or friends or people I did not know or picking it up one place and giving it to them. And eventually when that got to be a bit tiresome, right? I mean you do take on a certain risk as well. So [long pause] I decided I'd rather like [long pause] yeah rather like get a lot at a friend's place.

Matthew first operated in the well-known role of 'helper' within the cannabis economy (Hammersvik 2018) but gradually started to sell cannabis for profit. He admitted that it was a big step for him but that he felt that, because drug use and drug distribution were relatively commonplace among his peer group, it had a deterrent effect on him.

Matthew had been involved with drug policy organizations and was in favour of drug decriminalization and cannabis legalization, reflecting rather widespread attitudes at least among the well-educated and students in Norway (Andreas et al. 2021). He had no ethical qualms about dealing and viewed cannabis and psychedelics as 'medicine more than toxins', reflecting the increasingly blurred boundaries between recreational and medicinal use of these substances (Hakkarainen et al. 2019). He was happy to be able to help other people get a hold of these drugs and viewed it as his way of 'giving back'. Matthew, like the other people in this group, had had positive experiences with cannabis and psychedelics and wanted to share those experiences with others.

Drug ideology and countercultural opposition

Participants on this pathway to drug dealing typically had a lot of 'drug subcultural capital' (Kelly et al. 2015) that was valued in their wider social network. Not only could they acquire these drugs, but they also 'studied' them, could describe their effects and potential harms, and made sure to undertake what Tom, another participant, described as 'quality tests' in order to 'reassure myself and my people'. They also described the selling of drugs more as doing favours to friends than as transactions in a market. Lucas for example, considered dealing more of a 'social thing' and did not consider what he was doing a 'business'. He was simply providing a 'service' and 'supplying' people who were already using. The distribution no longer took the form of a 'deal' but was now simply a meeting of friends with mutual interests (Sandberg 2012). Lucas said that he was not dealing for the money. If it had been about the money, 'I would have gone into cocaine, right'. Like many of the other people in this group, he emphasized his ability to acquire 'superb' and 'clean' cannabis, 'the good stuff' and that his operation should be 'virtuous' and 'personable'.

The language and ideology surrounding medical marihuana also influenced some of the participants. This quote from Oliver is illustrative:

> It [dealing] is primarily to friends and patients, I mean friends who are patients. I had been in the Netherlands and I was going to give two grams to a friend that has a similar condition to mine. He is like if he doesn't have cannabis he uses opiates and painkillers but he can't get a prescription, and on the way I meet another friend who has another serious medical condition and I am like 'why does he look so fucked up I helped him get medical [marihuana] two years ago?' And he is like 'what's up man I haven't been able to get a hold of my doctor for a month'. And after two puffs of that joint he goes from like shaking to breathing a sigh of relief.

These changes in the culture further problematized participants approach to for-profit dealing and even to their own consumption of cannabis, which at times was voracious. Influenced by their own life experiences as well as local and global shifts in drug legislation, some were politically active. According to Harry:

> So all the cannabis I smoke to have a blast, I don't call myself sick, would have been put to better use by a medical marihuana user. That point hit me hard. It made me into an activist, and since then I have given a lot of cannabis to sick people in Norway.

Harry and Oliver worked actively to better the conditions of users of medical marihuana in Norway. Others, like Matthew, joined user organizations, and several participants wrote chronicles on drug-related issues, reflecting the increasing political activity among people using drugs and those in drug user organizations in Norway (Bartoszko 2021). Their overall suspicion of social norms and laws around cannabis framed its use as a health issue, sometimes implicit in talk of 'it just being a plant' and 'natural'. Other times, the therapeutic and medicinal benefits framing was more explicit, as in the case of Oliver.

At the outset, this pathway has some similarities to what is frequently described as the 'social supply' of drugs (e.g. Coomber et al. 2016), where people are slowly woven into the drug economy through personal relationships. This has also been described as mutual societies or 'friendship networks of "user-dealers" who support each other and sell or exchange drugs among themselves in a reciprocal fashion' (Dorn et al. 1992: xiii). Importantly, however, for some of the young individuals in this study from Oslo's west end, distribution was ideologically motivated with profit as a secondary motive. As such, they closely resembled the 'trading charities' or 'those traffickers who, initially at least, are not primarily (and definitely not solely) financially motivated. What financial ambitions they have tend to be thwarted by a lack of business skills and/or by their other "social" intentions' (Dorn et al. 1992: 3). According to Dorn et al. (1992), this type of dealing is connected to the 1960s hippie culture, valuing reciprocity and public service. They reject the drug dealer identity and associate themselves more with an anti-business culture with non-commercial norms (Sandberg 2012: 1141). They also rejected an identity as 'criminal perpetrators' and, instead, presented themselves as victims of an unjust governmental policy (Klein and Potter 2018). This 'ideological' pathway to drug dealing is, thus, strongly embedded in the countercultures of drug liberalization and medical marihuana.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The vast literature on drug trafficking and drug dealing has focused on marginalized and ethnic minority groups (e.g. Bourgois 2003; Bucerius 2007). Comparatively, there have been fewer studies that explore dealing among white, privileged and middle-class youth (but see e.g. Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; Taylor and Potter 2013; Jacques and Wright 2015; Coomber et al. 2016; Salinas 2018; Turner 2019). The participants in our study resemble the privileged groups from these earlier studies in terms of their socioeconomic background. Still, we find that a majority of our research participants inhabited a hybrid social position that combined both privilege and disadvantage.

Social disadvantage by way of early marginalization (as in the first pathway), relative economic disadvantage (as in the second pathway), or through a countercultural and deviant outsider status (as in the third pathway) is not found in previous studies on middle-class people dealing (Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; Jacques and Wright 2015). Early marginalization is a well-documented mechanism affecting criminal careers (Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 2005), including drug dealing on the street level (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Bucerius 2014) and by incarcerated people who dealt on the high level (Shammas et al. 2014). Moreover, socioeconomic disadvantage is an often-cited motivation to deal illegal drugs (e.g. Bucerius 2007), and countercultural opposition links to drug use and drug dealing (Dorn et al. 1992).

Given the overwhelming focus on drug crimes in disadvantaged communities, similarities (and differences) in processes to offending among those from low, middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds may escape researchers. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more often caught up in the criminal justice system (Newburn 2016: 335), but research find that it is the socioeconomically advantaged that report the highest rates of at least minor delinquency (Luthar et al. 2018: 315). Therefore, it is of general importance to study pathways to offending, also among the middle and upper classes. More specifically, our findings highlight the importance of social disadvantages, with an emphasis on social, comparative and relative (dis)advantages, when studying processes to offending among well-to-do populations. Approaching criminal pathways as produced by relative (dis)advantage will also find resonance among researchers studying offenders from low-income and minority backgrounds, given that most people in underprivileged communities do not lead a life of crime (e.g. Anderson 2000; Bourgois 2003). Studying within group inequality is therefore important.

One way of doing this is by employing life-course criminology, which focuses on how the interlocking nature of trajectories (lines of development such as drug use) and transitions (events such as family disruption) create turning points in the life course (Laub and Sampson 1993: 304). However, these individual and contextual background factors present only one part of the picture. Attending to foreground factors, such as subcultures, is also important to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social processes affecting offending. While background factors may predispose individuals to offend, they fail to explain the variation observed among individuals with similar backgrounds (Jacobs and Wright 1999: 150).

Life-course criminology argues that adaptations to trajectories and transitions are important for understanding processes of crime involvement. Throughout this study, we sought to interrogate what was taking place during these turning points (Laub and Sampson 1993). We found that mediating the involvement in drug dealing was knowledge of and adherence to drug subcultures. That is, in order for drug use and family disruption to turn into drug dealing, the participants in this study also needed sufficient adherence, knowledge and opportunity in drug subcultures for drug dealing to ensue. This reveals the complex relationship between comparative social disadvantage and crime (Wikstrom and Treiber 2016), while also pointing to the importance of drug subcultures for understanding pathways to dealing (see, e.g., Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). As such, our study highlights how combining life-course criminology with drug subcultural theory enables us to better understand both the background and foreground factors that lead to involvement in drug dealing.

Our study also reveals the relevance of street culture for understanding illegal drug markets and the pathways to offending in contexts that are not usually associated with crime—discontent and disadvantage. In an increasingly globalized world, local permutations of street cultural expression (Ilan 2015) are found to mediate criminal involvement with drugs, also in more affluent contexts. However, given that most of the drug distribution among our participants took place as a direct result of their affluent peer's appetite for illegal drugs, it highlights how local variations of street and cannabis culture balances between the conventional and criminal, as these relatively disadvantaged young people serviced an adolescent subculture in a 'Veblenesque search for adventure, excitement, and thrill' (Hagan 1991: 569). In these instances, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily, or at least not solely, disadvantages that causes crime, but the marginalized, disadvantaged and outsider's proximity to, or distance from, affluence.

Political and ideological countercultures associated with cannabis use also mediated involvement in drug use and dealing among our participants, in part by building and utilizing subcultural capital (Kelly et al. 2015). Countercultures have proven to be remarkably stable (Sandberg 2013) and remind us of the importance of attending to the social and historical stickiness of cultures. However, they are also evolving. The most important change in recent years has been in relation to the medicinal use of cannabis as well as psychedelics, which has seen a revival in the past two decades. When drug dealing is embedded in these countercultures, it takes different forms and can potentially entice people otherwise not 'at risk' into getting involved in the illegal drug economy.

Embedding drug dealing in a counterculture emphasizing drug liberalization and medical marihuana has not been found in studies on low-income ethnic/racial minorities from disadvantaged communities (e.g. Bourgois 2003). This raises the questions of whether there are different cultural repertoires available to white, middle-class young people involved in the illegal drug economy. Our findings indicate that this is the case. The ideologically driven and politically active participants were often university educated, older than the other participants, employed, and in possession of considerable amounts of traditional cultural and/or economic capital. By comparison, in the other two pathways, which were similar to pathways to offending among disadvantaged groups, participants were often adolescent or in their early 20s, marginalized and adhered to some of the traditional elements of street culture such as street entrepreneurialism and hedonism. Many also had antagonistic relations with police which were not embedded in countercultural opposition but in street cultural values (e.g. Marsh 2020).

It is feasible that being able to articulate a political narrative for one's drug distribution aid persons involved in illegal drug dealing in managing and avoiding negative imputed social identities such as the 'drug dealer' (Coomber 2006). In addition, participants were in possession of considerable amounts of subcultural capital which they were able to transfer to more legitimate endeavours. By comparison, previous studies have highlighted the challenges of transferring street cultural capital to mainstream pursuits (Bourgois 2003). This type of agency on the part of our participants arguably point to these and other privileges. However, it is also important to note that while the countercultural pathway was distinct, the participants drew on both street cultural and countercultural scripts, depending on where they were in their life trajectory. Participants may have started out as relatively marginalized and street oriented, but later in life switched to a countercultural stance. As such, being privileged while dealing is not only confined to one cultural script, but the ability to draw flexibly on a range of cultural tool kits (Swidler 1986) depending on the situation. It also highlights that pathways to offending are complex and changing.

Similar to other qualitative research on the illegal drug economy, this study disrupts the image of the 'drug dealer' as an "evil" figure dealing "in death" (Coomber 2006: 1–32), praying on the young and vulnerable. Because a large portion of illegal drug distribution takes place through social networks, and for little or no profit, scholars are now arguing for the relative normalization of illegal drug distribution (Coomber et al. 2016). Our study reflects these wider trends, given that most of the drug distribution, particularly in pathways two and three, took place to and among 'friends'. In the third pathway, profit was less important. In contrast, profit, excitement and hedonism are important motivations for many people who sell drugs (Adler 1993; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Turner 2019). These factors were also present among our participants, but they varied depending on the pathway and the biographical snapshot of the individuals.

In the first pathway, problems in the family, school and with police, as well as minor crime, affiliation with drug-using peers, and rapid marginalization are all central to an understanding of the involvement of the research participants in the drug economy. In the second pathway, relative economic disadvantage intersected with a more calculated approach to dealing with wealthy peers, with criminal entrepreneurship at the centre. Finally, privileged youth may deal drugs for motives other than money, including drug liberalization and medical cannabis, in a countercultural frame that is far from the popular public image of people dealing drugs.

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