RISKY BUSINESS: UNDERSTANDING VIETNAMESE WOMEN IN CUSTODY FOR DRUG RELATED OFFENCES

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Abstract
This paper builds on recent scholarships that have highlighted the gap in empirical knowledge on drug traffickers in the illicit drugs discourse. Despite the diversity of disciplinary approaches to this field, discussions on drug traffickers are predominantly underpinned – implicitly or explicitly - by neoclassical economic assumptions. This has consequently led to a narrow conceptualisation of drug traffickers as amoral, self-interested, profit-driven, utility maximisers. Previous research that have explored the experiences of drug traffickers beyond the realm of neoclassical economic have highlighted how such individuals are embedded within a complex web of socio-economic, cultural and political structures. Building upon such studies, this paper argues that drug traffickers need to be brought to the forefront of illicit drugs research in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the illicit drug trade. Drawing on the author’s own research on Vietnamese women drug traffickers in Australia, this paper will show how decisions to become involved in the illicit drug trade as either cultivators, sellers or importers transcend beyond neoclassical economic assumptions in that they are often influenced by social relationships, and embedded within Vietnamese cultural expectations of women’s roles within the family.

Keywords: drug traffickers, neoclassical economics, illicit drug trade, Vietnamese women, sociology
Introduction

The present paper builds on recent scholarships that have highlighted the gap in empirical knowledge on drug traffickers in the illicit drugs discourse. To date, discussions on drug traffickers are predominantly underpinned – implicitly or explicitly - by neoclassical economic assumptions. Consequently, drug traffickers are either rendered invisible in favour of drug market analysis or given ‘narrow and circumscribed’ conceptualisations that preclude any investigation into the complex socio-economic and cultural factors surrounding their involvement (Dwyer, 2009:1). To adequately address these limitations, this paper argues that drug traffickers need to be brought to the forefront of illicit drugs research. This paper begins with a review and critique of existing approaches to researching drug traffickers. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the author’s own research on Vietnamese women drug traffickers and in doing so, illustrates how an alternative framework that privileges the accounts of drug traffickers challenges the neoclassical economic assumption that drug traffickers are amoral, self-interested, profit-driven, utility maximisers.

Literature Review: What do we know about drug traffickers?

The increasingly popular conceptualisation of drug trafficking as an economic enterprise with its structure often compared to legitimate businesses, has led to the monopoly of economic approaches to the study of illicit drug markets (Fleetwood, 2009; Dwyer & Moore, 2010a). This paper does not deny the benefits of understanding drug markets from an economic perspective, as it provides key theoretical tools to develop and implement drug control strategies. For example,
criminological and surveillance approaches heavily draw upon fundamental neoclassical economic models of supply and demand, and costs and benefits in order to understand how law enforcement can influence, and disrupt illicit drug markets (e.g. Weatherburn et al., 2003; Caulkins & Reuter, 1998). Despite its advantages, this paper builds upon Dwyer and Moore’s (2010a: 91) contention that approaches underpinned by elementary neoclassical economic principles ‘preclude investigation of social relations or of the kinds of people who participate in illicit drug markets’.

In her ethnographic study of a heroin marketplace in Melbourne, Australia, Dwyer (2009:37-8) critiques the construction of drug market subjects within a neoclassical economic market model. This model rests on the assumption that the market is comprised of anonymous individual buyers and sellers; that buyers and sellers possess the information necessary to make the best exchange in order to maximise their utility; and that they will do so within the boundaries of society’s laws and moral values. Based on these assumptions, the drug trafficker is therefore conceived as an individual who ‘pursues self-interest without moral constraint, pursuing profit regardless of the social order’.

In a paper Dwyer co-authored with Moore (2010b: 391), they argued that the consequence of such a narrow neoclassical economic conceptualisation of drug traffickers is methodological individualism – ‘the idea that the individual is the basic unit of social analysis, the market is merely the aggregation of the behaviour of individuals and there is formal equality between all social actors’. In response to criticisms of neoclassical assumptions such as rationality and perfect information, Dwyer and Moore (2010b: 391) observed that more sophisticated contemporary
economic analyses of drug markets have been incorporated into international research. However, the authors identified that ‘the elementary neoclassical economic model remains central’ to dominant Australian approaches to illicit drug markets (i.e. criminological and surveillance approaches) (Dwyer & Moore, 2010b: 391).

International research conducted outside the domain of neoclassical economics challenges the notion that drug traffickers act purely on the basis of self-interests to maximise their own utility. This is achieved by re-situating the individual within broader social, cultural and political structures. What these types of analyses then show is that for particular sub-groups within a society, individual involvement in the illicit drug trade is often a response to broader socio-economic structures. For example, Bourgois (2003) – in his analysis of Puerto Rican crack-cocaine dealers in New York’s East Harlem – found that the community’s poorest members are pressured into the underground economy as they often face physical and cultural exclusion from the dominant culture. Similarly, Paoli and Reuter (2008) attributed low-socio-economic status and cultural marginalization as being key factors driving Turkish and Albanian groups to become involved in the European heroin market. Studies such as these clearly challenge the fundamental neoclassical assumption that drug traffickers are ‘atomised, undersocialised’ individuals (Granovetter, 1985:483).

Western strategies of drug control have traditionally targeted ethnic minority groups as a method of controlling a nation’s illicit drug problem (Green, 1998). In Europe, the supply and trafficking of cocaine are attributed to Colombian groups (Zaitch, 2002). Similarly, in the US, Cuban and Colombian groups are identified as the main traffickers of cocaine and cannabis (Decker & Chapman, 2008). Paoli and Reuter
(2008) contended that targeting ethnic minorities serves to have both political and analytical significance.

In regards to analytical significance, Garland and colleagues (2006: 423) identified that there is a tendency within criminological inquiry to ‘make sweeping assumptions about those falling under the broad ‘catch-all’ ethnic categories, such as ‘Black’ or ‘Asian’, which can obscure the distinct experiences of certain groups’. Dwyer and Moore (2010a: 90) argued that such ‘undifferentiated categorical descriptions’ is the net affect of the monopoly of economics in the interpretation of drug trafficking. These authors observed that reducing drug traffickers to homogenised categories such as ‘Asian and West African criminals’, ‘air passengers’, ‘Australian-Vietnamese’ or ‘arrests’ renders them invisible as greater focus is centred on ‘the market characteristics of price, purity and availability’.

What is largely missing from the literature is a ‘critical, alternative understanding’ of ethnic minority group’s perspectives of the factors surrounding their involvement in drug trafficking (Bourgois, 2003: 12). An alternative sociological framework that privileges the voices of drug traffickers will not only uncover the complexity and diversity of experiences that are unique between, and within different ethnic groups, but such an approach also adequately addresses the role and experience of gender in the illicit drug trade.

Denton and O’Malley (1999:513) identified that ‘women are conspicuously absent from most accounts of drug distribution, and where featured, they have been depicted as ‘unsuitable drug sellers’. In their own ethnographic analysis of the lives of 60
women in Melbourne’s illicit drug trade, the authors dispelled the myth that drug dealing is ‘essentially a male occupation’ (1999:513). Their findings highlighted that women can be successful in running their own drug dealerships and ‘that skills and orientations associated with familial relations play a key part in the most sensitive aspects of such business’ (1999:513). These findings were also echoed by Hutton’s (2005) UK research. It is important to note that while these researchers provide valuable knowledge on women’s roles in drug dealing networks, their analyses remains limited to understanding women within the context of drug dealing operations.

Fleetwood (2009), in her own ethnographic investigation of international women cocaine mules, also examined women’s experiences and roles within the illicit drug trade. However, her analysis included investigations into the social and economic circumstances that contributed to women’s participation in the international cocaine trade. In doing so, Fleetwood was able to unpack the complex and diverse circumstances surrounding women’s decisions to accept mule-work. It was found that while economic motives were often cited as a key motive, women often made decisions with significant others in mind. Fleetwood argued that economic perspectives ‘underpinned by individuality and emphasis on economic costs and benefits’ would have obscured such findings (Fleetwood, 2009:220).

In the Australian context, there has been no independent, in-depth qualitative academic research that has situated the analysis of drug traffickers’ experiences beyond drug market operations. In the final section of the paper, the author will present data from her own research on Vietnamese women drug traffickers in
Australia. In doing so, the author will illustrate how an analysis grounded within a sociological framework uncovers a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and cultural issues surrounding drug traffickers. But first, the paper will provide an overview of the context and background that framed the premise for researching Vietnamese women drug traffickers in Melbourne, Australia.

**Contextualising the research on Vietnamese women drug traffickers**

This paper is based on a PhD research on Vietnamese women drug traffickers in Melbourne, Australia undertaken by the author. The choice of research topic was largely in response to recent prison statistics, which revealed that Vietnam-born women represented the highest proportion of prisoners born outside Australia in the Victorian Prison System. In June 2010, 40 of the 313 women prisoners in the Victorian Prison System were Vietnam-born (Department of Justice Victoria, 2010). Furthermore, most of the Vietnamese women were imprisoned for drug-related offences.

To date, there is currently no research that has addressed the problem of the growing number of Vietnamese women participating in the Australian illicit drug trade as cultivators, importers or traffickers. The research undertaken by the author is grounded in the understanding that individuals are embedded in particular social, cultural and economic contexts and that their decisions and actions are largely influenced by the social relationships within these contexts. As such, the author sought to explore the following research question: what were the social and economic circumstances of Vietnamese women prior to their involvement in the illicit drug trade?
The author conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Vietnamese women who were in custody for drug-related offences between November 2010 and July 2011. The mode of inquiry is in-depth interviewing as it ‘provides access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds’ (Miller & Glassner, 1997:100).

The women were evenly distributed across the age groups, ranging from 21 to 59 years old. The highest number of women (11 women) were aged between 50-59 years. Most of the women were Vietnam-born, with the exception of 2 who were born at refugee camps. While 26 of the women were Australian citizens, 9 were of other citizenship status. The women were in custody for either heroin trafficking/importation (20 women) or cannabis cultivation (15 women). At the time of interview, five women had prior periods of imprisonment for drug trafficking offences.

As most of the women had poor English skills, the author – a second-generation Vietnamese – conducted the majority of the interviews in Vietnamese.

**Vietnamese Women Drug Traffickers: Amoral, Atomised, Self-interested Utility Maximisers?**

In contrast to elementary neoclassical economic assumptions, Vietnamese women’s decisions to cultivate, sell or import illicit drugs were not underpinned by a desire for profit, nor was the decision based on self-interest. Rather, decisions were often centred around significant others such as their family.
Dong, for example, worked in the heroin trade in order to improve the financial situation for herself, and her five children:

*I didn’t have money, no money at all. Life was like, earning money was very difficult. I worked on a farm for a long period of time but even then, I didn’t have enough to bring home to the family...and my husband, he didn’t help me much. He was not concerned with the family. I am the woman who had to support five children, so deprived. That’s why my friends invited me to go on this path. At the time, I didn’t think about it. I just thought, ‘right now, I am suffering, so I have to try to do this. For a short period, earn money to support the family.*

Although money was the primary motive for Dong, it was rooted in the context of material betterment for her children, or in Fleetwood’s (2009:130) words, ‘provisioning’. Thus, Dong’s reasons for entering the illicit drug trade did not rest upon profit-motivated pursuits. Dong’s example also highlights how cultural expectations of the role of women within the family is an influential factor in the women’s decision-making process.

The Vietnamese concept of ‘filial obligation’ was also evident in the women’s narratives. Lan and Xuan, for example, explained that the perceived obligation to help pay off their parents’ financial debt was a defining motive for them to work in cannabis cultivation:
My family was confronted with difficulties, economic difficulties... At the time, I just thought how could I earn money to give to my parents, to have money to pay off the debt, that’s all.

(Lan)

I thought that when I earn enough money to give to my parents, to help them with their business, then I would stop. Even if I didn’t get caught, I wouldn’t continue...

(Xuan)

Lan and Xuan’s stories highlight how the Vietnamese cultural understanding of ‘family support’ transcends Western understandings, because ‘support’ in the Vietnamese context ‘extends to the provision or facilitation of employment, business help or finance’ (Silverstone & Savage, 2010: 18).

This study also found that many women were not in a position to rationally weigh up the costs and benefits of their actions, nor were their decisions informed by ‘perfect information necessary to make the perfect exchange’ (Dwyer & Moore, 2010: 391). Linh, for example, was coerced to work as a domestic heroin courier as a means to pay off her brother’s own drug debt:

They keep coming to the house and they keep threatening my sister and kids... and they took my brother in front of the house and pulled a gun to his head... They say to me if your brother is not going to do it, well someone has to do it. They told me to do the run, drive the stuff. They tell you where to drop it
off, it’s like a courier. You are not in control. They are in control of you. They tell you what to do and you do it. And then they deduct the money, the debt.

The coercion and threat experienced by Linh adds further weight to the argument that an individual’s involvement in the illicit drug trade are underpinned by much more complex circumstances rather than just a simplistic motivation driven by money and greed.

Most of the women also drew attention to the way in which environment/structural factors shaped their decision to work in the illicit drug trade. Despite the different migration patterns to Australia – whether they came as refugees, reunion programs, marriage or education – most women’s narratives highlighted the structural barriers they faced in finding stable employment to support themselves, and their families. Tuyen, for example, found it extremely difficult to seek full-time employment due to her lack of English skills.

For the women who migrated to Australia in the 70s and 80s, most were able to earn a living through piecework sewing for the clothing industry despite possessing low levels of English proficiency and skills. However, the structural economic changes that occurred in the early 90s resulted in the closure of most textile industries across Australia. Consequently, most women were made redundant and encountered great difficulties in finding another stable, full-time job. As Hien recalled:

At the time, it’s like international companies were coming here and they were competitive, challenging the price...
Some of the women continued sewing from home, while others sought work as a dishwasher in restaurants or on farms picking fruits. However, the minimal wages was not enough to support their families. Canh, for example, had been working on a farm for 8 years prior to accepting work as a heroin courier. She explained that:

My English is not good. I didn’t have a profession so I have to work on a farm, what else am I supposed to do? My husband left me 11 years ago, I’ve had to do everything with my own hands. Look, I’m so skinny. It’s been extremely difficult...

Given these circumstances, when Canh was offered the opportunity to transport heroin from Vietnam to Australia as a drug courier, she accepted.

Echoing the experience of the Puerto Rican crack-cocaine dealers in Bourgois’ (2003) study, it is evident that for many of the Vietnamese women, their involvement in the illicit drug trade was largely in response to social and economic marginalization brought on by broader structural transformations. These findings highlight the importance of re-situating the analysis of drug traffickers in the broader social, cultural and economic contexts of which they are a part.

**Conclusion**

The research presented in this paper identified that Vietnamese women’s involvement in the illicit drug trade is often embedded in a complex web of socio-economic, cultural and political structures. That is, decisions to work as a drug trafficker,
importer or cultivator were often influenced by social relationships, and embedded within Vietnamese cultural expectations of women’s role within the family. It could be suggested that in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the illicit drug trade in Australia, and to understand the complex and diverse characteristics and circumstances of individuals who act within it, future studies need to look beyond neoclassical economic conceptualisations of drug traffickers by embedding their analyses within a broader sociological framework.
References


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