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Women's Stories of Drug Addiction and Dealing: Dialectics of Gaining and Losing Control

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INTRODUCTION

Attempts to understand women's participation within the illicit drug market have historically centered on an understanding of the roles they occupy and the economic status they gain through their participation. Within this dominant discourse understanding of women's participation in the drug market, women have conventionally been stereotyped as occupying peripheral and low status roles where they are likely to encounter victimization (Campbell, 2008).

Studies have attempted to expand the portrayal of women from dependent agents of drug dealing boyfriends and pimps to independent agents who use their participation in the drug market to reduce street hustling and provide a means to sustain drug habits (Sommers, Baskin & Fagan, 1996). The data, though, continues to be inconsistent. Maher and Hudson's (2007) meta-analysis of 15 qualitative studies on women's roles in the drug economy concluded that studies in women's drug use, especially with crack cocaine, continue to reinforce the idea of women as auxiliary players with relatively little power within the drug trade, drawing on what might be considered domestic and feminine skills such as household budgeting methods, and the use of guile and sexual bartering.

This understanding of women's participation in the illicit drug market is contrasted by studies of women methamphetamine users who describe themselves as having access to a variety of roles and the accompanying status of those roles (Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1996; Morgan & Joe, 1996). Jenkot's (2008) qualitative study of incarcerated women methamphetamine users explored the group process in which methamphetamine is produced and used, indicating that while there does appear to be a strong hierarchy, gender does not impact one's mobility within the group; rather, the ability to contribute a specialized task holds more importance and status is gained by demonstrating the ability to handle increasing risk.

Morgan and Joe (1996) challenge the notion that women's success within the drug market should be defined in terms of economics and traditional ideas of hierarchical power. In their analysis of 141 female users, two-thirds reported being involved at various levels of the methamphetamine economy, with the majority citing their experience as a positive one that offered economic independence, self-esteem, professional pride, and ethics.

Treatment mandated women in Portland, Oregon reported that participating in the distribution and production of methamphetamine allowed them to live the kind of lifestyle they enjoyed, and that while they initially sold drugs to earn easy income and support their drug habits, many continued to sell drugs because they were good at it and because they didn't want to let their customers down (Strauss & Falkin, 2001).

The socially empowering effects of methamphetamine use are frequently cited as the main motivation for beginning to use methamphetamine (Bungay, Malchy, Buxton, Johnson, Macpherson & Rosenfeld, 2006; Gorman, Clark, Nelson, Applegate, Amato & Scrol, 2003). Use often occurs with friends, family, or within a network of friends, and quickly escalates into a full blown addiction (Haight, Carter-Black & Sheridan, 2009). Semple, Grant and Patterson's (2004) interview of 98 women methamphetamine users noted that use occurred 95% of the time with a friend and 61% of the time with a dealer. The overlap between friend and dealer may be significant to an understanding of the contextual experience of the methamphetamine trade, where distribution does not follow the usual pattern of drug networks and street corner dealing (Cohen, Greenberg, Uri, Halpin & Zweben, 2007).

Given the rapid spread of methamphetamine use amongst women, changes in the drug market impacting women's participation are particularly salient. National data indicates that 45% of admissions for methamphetamine treatment are women (NSDUH report, 2007). A better understanding of women's valence to contextual experiences within the drug trade is necessary in order to further efforts in providing successful treatment for women substance abusers.

Studies have noted the usefulness of understanding drug use within the context of self-control, observing that people employ a variety of strategies to maintain greater or lesser control over their drug use in order to be able to continue using and selling within a framework of social control that fits with their self perception (Williams, Sterk & Elifon, 2006). However, a dichotomous discourse based solely on underlying issues of control versus lack of control will miss distinctions in the relationship between self identity and control (Gibson, Acquah & Robinson, 2004).

This paper proposes that rather than lack of opportunity for accessing higher status roles within the drug market, women's sense of self in relation to their motivation to use and deal drugs and their relationship with control over their addiction are interplaying factors in determining their relative success in the drug market in a kind of dialectical synthesis. Dealing drugs provides a variety of rewards that are contingent upon maintaining some level of control over one's self, especially one's drug consumption.

THE NEW MEXICO WOMEN DRUG DEALER STUDY

This paper utilizes transcripts from interviews conducted with fourteen women receiving inpatient substance abuse treatment from two different programs in 2004. The first seven women to volunteer at each site were selected, whether or not they reported any history of dealing drugs. The taped, semi-structured interviews ranged in length from one to two hours and produced lengthy transcripts that were conversational in style, and rich with fluid stories that moved between answering questions about the substantive details of the women's histories with drugs to telling more personal anecdotes that appeared to express unresolved feelings and dissonant experiences related to the geographical time and place of drug use and selling.

Methods

NVivo 8 software was utilized to produce both substantive and selective coding of the interviews in order to induce emergent themes and patterns. The challenge when working with any narrative is to resist the urge to essentialize the meaning. Besio (2005) calls on researchers to understand interviews as autoethnographic performances that intentionally attempt to translate a lived experience into the idiom of the researcher. It is through careful listening to stories that we may come to understand the special needs of a population and the contexts that have engendered those experiences. It is the hope of this paper to preserve the integrity of the living story, to allow the contradictory experiences of the women's lives to stand intact.

Sample and Site Characteristics

Of the 14 participants, eight identified as Caucasian, three as Hispanic, two as biracial and one as Native American. All of the participants were either probationers or parolees, court ordered to receive treatment at La Entrada de Amistad in Los Lunas, New Mexico or La Madrugá Women's Residential Facility in Espanola, New Mexico. While many reported a life course of polysubstance abuse, this study was interested in their most currently abused drug as a variable in considering differences that might be noted between the methamphetamine trade and that of the crack cocaine trade.

The seven participants at La Madrugá had primary addictions to methamphetamine at the time of their arrests and those at La Entrada had primary addictions to crack or cocaine at the time of their arrests. Both programs served women with a variety of addictions and no speculations as to the polarized break down in drug addiction based on treatment program could be made by the researchers or program directors.

Six of the sample had not completed high school or received a General Equivalency Diploma. Four had completed some college and all but two had children. Only three women had ever held a licit job that earned an income that might be considered middle class. The rest worked at a variety of low-paying, sequential jobs, mostly in the service industry.

Twelve of the fourteen (86%) had dealt drugs at one time and earned varying amounts of income through means of selling or producing drugs. While the majority reported primarily selling drugs to support their drug use and provide for basic needs such as gas, cigarettes and diapers, others reported earning significant and sustained income. Few, however, were able to maintain a high level of profitability as increased access to money and drugs lead to escalated drug use.

While the entire sample reported being addicted to drugs, not all considered their addictions to be out-of-control. Nevertheless, 72% reported actively engaging in other kinds of crime that did not include dealing drugs or prostitution to support their drug addictions. None of the women who used methamphetamine reported having ever traded sex but those using crack reported hustling sex, mostly through conning and promises of sex for money or sleeping with their dealer for drugs. Stories of loss of control over drug consumption were accompanied by stories of nondrug crime, trading sex for drugs, and legal conviction for other crimes.

DIALECTICS OF CONTROL

Dialectics is understood as the coalescence of opposites, of contradiction and dilemma, and of development through conflict (Ball, 1979). Marxist dialectics involves the synthesizing of a thesis and an antithesis into a new and emergent whole of the two opposing situations (Rytina & Loomis, 1970). Dialectical themes involving a continual transformative and emergent coalescence of new situations of control are evident as the women describe the rush and thrill of entering what some called "the game" and the subsequent spiral out of control. As one woman addicted to methamphetamine vividly relayed, "The first year I started using I was using non-stop, all day everyday. I never stopped....The first year was a good year. I was new to the game. I was new to everything and it was easy and I met a lot of bright people. They would just give me what was on and sometimes I wouldn't have to pay for it until later and I entirely would make a profit and then I would pay for it. During that time it was a lot easier because people trusted me and until I got ate up, until I got spread down – just hazy."

Large amounts of available methamphetamine meant easy access to the drug for these women. As one woman explained, "A lot of times they'd front me...because there's so, so much of it....'Here you go, take it and bring the money back. And if you don't, I know where you live, I'm going to find you.'" So long as they were able to demonstrate the ability and self control necessary to repay the money they owed, these women reported having little difficulty entering "the game." Their perception was that they were performing a necessary function by quickly moving large quantities of drugs. For these women, the gains of dealing drugs were always juxtaposed against the precarious nature of engaging in high profile illicit behaviors with a substance that produced volatile and reckless behaviors.

Crack users reported more difficulty with dealing. They reported they often weren't able to move beyond connecting buyers with drugs because they weren't able to save enough drugs to sell or buy a large enough quantity up front to sell. Those addicted to crack used money gained from other criminal behavior to maintain their addiction, often knowing it was just a matter of time before they would be caught.

Part of dealing drugs was finding a way to tolerate the tension between the immediate motivation to deal and where one was at in their relationship with control.

The dialectical tension between control and loss of control was particularly salient to these women's stories as they interacted within a context of friendship and partner relationship in an otherwise risky and unpredictable environment. To capture this relationship the data was grouped into themes centered on gaining control, maintaining control, losing control and regaining control.

GAINING CONTROL

Women's stories of using and dealing drugs indicate it presented opportunities to gain increased self-esteem and control in their lives, though we caution away from a functionalist perspective to one in which functionalism complements dialectics (Ball, 1979). Situating ourselves in these stories is one way to understand the meaning and value derived from using and dealing drugs and to gain insight into the relationship between sense of self and the process of moving towards and away from drugs.

Empowerment

Drug use was initially seen as a way to improve their lives. One young mother of nineteen with two children of her own and two children of her fiancé says a friend introduced her to methamphetamine to help her out. "I tried to be supermom and needed some help so a friend hooked me up." A woman who was sexually abused by her step father began using cocaine when she was fourteen, explaining, "I hated alcohol because he attacked me one time and got away with it because I was so drunk I couldn't move....But when I got high on cocaine and he tried that I got away and I ran and got away."

Others described the sense of power they obtained through dealing drugs in their otherwise powerless lives. Explained one crack dealer who had lived on the street with her daughter: "I was in control. I held the dope. I held what you wanted." Another stated, "If I needed my laundry done or I needed my car washed, 'Here, here's a twenty, go do what I asked you to.'" Assuming the power that went with being a dealer was seen by these women as a right that accompanied the role. Running errands was a way of obtaining favor and possibly free drugs; even from those they called friends. The same woman described her solicitous rapport with the person who manufactured the methamphetamine she was selling. "Literally, if he needed anything from the store I would stop and get it for him. And then I would be like, 'Can I come over?'"

Personal autonomy

Having a sense of freedom to make choices regarding their drug use was important to these women, and could be achieved through selling drugs. One woman used methamphetamine socially and in secret from her husband for ten years. After separating from her husband she increased her consumption. "...I felt I'm single and to hell with it I don't have to hide it now." She described a successful business selling methamphetamine that supported herself and her two children.

In the absence of a partner relationship many felt freer to increase their participation in the drug trade. "I started you know what I mean selling it in full effect." With her boyfriend she would only sell when he wasn't around or to her friends. "...So I never really made that much money off of it." One woman began selling methamphetamine as a way of asserting her autonomy from her dealer boyfriend when the needs of her addiction increased beyond what he was providing. "I got tired of him taking off all the time and not leaving us anything to smoke....So I started hiding stuff so when they split I'd have my stash. And that's when I started getting into [dealing]."

Free drugs and income

Many were emphatic that their motive to deal was very clear and focused: they wanted free drugs. "I was just doing it to get my stash. That's all I was in it for. I wasn't doing it to really make a profit. I was just doing it to make sure I had shit to smoke." Another stated, "I never really got into it to make money, I did it to support my habit mainly because like if I was selling it I could pay for what I was buying and have quite a bit left for free that I could...party with and still have some cash to put gas in my car..."

Some quit their jobs and sold drugs because it was more profitable and fit with the kind of lifestyle they enjoyed. Some sold drugs while looking for other work. One woman estimated she made between six and seven hundred dollars a day at her peak. While all described large profit margins, most had difficulty with sustaining that kind of earning power. Their drug consumption increased in proportion to their access to the drug. Said one: "I always had money, always had everything I needed but then I was always using too. I could have had a lot more if I wasn't using....But that's the way I would show them the stuff I had was the bomb. 'Yeah, here, try it,' and I would just put some out for them and sit there and get high with them....Anything less than 40 bucks I would take it out of theirs. 'You want to test it, you're going to test it but you're also going to pay for it.'"

For many, income from drug dealing and income from non-drug crime such as shop lifting, car theft and check fraud was intermixed. As one woman said who regularly stole large quantities of DVDs and CDs for resale, "We wouldn't even get in the shower until we went shopping to have something new to wear that day. That's how bad it was."

Only three women maintained that making money was their primary motivation for selling drugs at the time of their arrest. Two of those reported being highly successful methamphetamine dealers and one reported taking over her husband's role in a large family cocaine business. None of the crack dealers were able to control their drug use and achieve financial success as a dealer.

Belonging

Being in control of a resource that has value to a particular population ensures inclusion and status within the group. When one woman was asked to describe how she felt as a dealer she poignantly stated, "Maybe feeling like you're important, like, I think being a drug addict your self worth and your self respect and all these things are really low so you have people that are coming to you...they need you, they need you for something." A woman who took over her husband's cocaine business stated, "It made me feel like I was something, somebody." Being able to access and distribute a top quality product was highly desirable for reasons of both group status and personal consumption.

Many clarified that their customers were also friends, and described how their dealers became like family. Their perception was that most everyone they knew was using drugs, and that they had often grown up and remained connected to a group of drug users. Getting high with a boyfriend or girlfriend was a shared experience they enjoyed.

MAINTAINING CONTROL

A dialectic between sense of self and self agency emerges from narratives that describe maintaining control. Women's stories denote a variety of informal and formal behaviors and attitudes that helped maintain their lifestyle. For most, dealing drugs was a seven-day a week job that involved rules of conduct and expected behavior. Money from drug sales became a significant form of income, though only a few made investments with the money beyond buying new cars and clothes; most simply met their basic needs.

Knowing one's limits

By maintaining a firm sense of their motivation to participate in the drug trade they were able to experience feelings of personal control. The women presented sometimes startling blunt descriptions of their identities. One said, "I'm just an addict, and to me I never dealt to make money, I just dealt to keep dope, and a lot of these other girls they'd get into that money and it's...a whole game in itself that they'd play, and that's not me..." They made conscious decisions about not getting in over their head and trying to become "big time dealers." Explained one: "I didn't want that life, I just wanted free drugs, you know, I wasn't...always running around town, always...picking up cash, always dropping off dope. I didn't want that. I can't handle that."

When asked if she had thought about manufacturing methamphetamine, one woman responded, "No. I really, really, really did not want to ever want to know how because that's bad news....I just didn't trust myself with that kind of information....I was content in where I was." Another believed that her friends who manufactured methamphetamine didn't want to teach her how in order to protect her from the dangers of having access to unlimited amounts of drugs.

Some speculated bits of wisdom for maintaining control. One woman reflected, “The unspoken rule is don’t use what you sell....because if I smoke crack I shouldn’t deal crack because there will be no more crack, you know what I mean, unless you can separate – like this is strictly for selling. If you can do that you can maintain.”

Self-regulation

Taking care of one’s self was important in order to avoid losing control. All knew people who had become psychotic, violent or unable to function because they weren’t able to regulate their behaviors. Strategies for maintaining some level of control included forcing themselves to sleep and eat, not injecting drugs and using other drugs such as marijuana to mediate the effects of stronger drugs. They also considered the risks of losing control such as getting robbed, making mistakes with their accounting or losing the trust and respect of their suppliers and their families and children. “If I spun out like that, I’m going to lose my trust with my dealers, I’m going to lose my money, I’m going to lose my dope, I’m going to lose my house. So I just always slept.”

Some of women had thought about what differentiated a successful dealer from themselves, users who dealt drugs, and appeared to still consider how they might better regulate themselves in the future were they to use again. What they considered a really professional dealer was someone who didn’t use drugs, and if she did, she never used in front of her buyers. Despite this prototype of how to best maintain control as a dealer, one woman acknowledged that she wouldn’t have been able to handle the stress and the risk taking aspects of dealing without being high.

Sense of professionalism

While there is a known and respected hierarchy within the drug trade, the act of buying larger quantities of drugs for resale helps to level the playing ground and contribute to a sense of professional worth. Most described having more than one supplier that they might buy from. When describing how she chose where to buy her drugs, one woman stated she had three suppliers and she chose based on how well they treated her and by the quality of the product. Others described switching suppliers based on price. Quality of the product was the essential component as many reported pride in the quality versus quantity of what they sold.

Most of the women believed themselves valued by their suppliers and stated they were always treated well because they made their suppliers a lot of money and could go elsewhere if they weren’t “kept happy.” When queried about whether she had to do anything special for her supplier one woman explained: “I was distributing their stuff. You know, that was special enough.”

Only one woman who became a “crack head” described feeling powerless and devalued in relation to her dealers, though many described their fall from grace once they became liabilities based on their high profile with the law or inability to control their addiction. For those who were able to consistently demonstrate the kind of accepted professionalism necessary to be valued within the network, they reported being rewarded by bonuses. “If you provide safe, reliable, business...and not mess around and bring other people to their house...you always got a better deal because you’re giving them money steadily, twice a week....They’d know I was coming...and they’d throw in an extra gram.”

Ethics and mores

Ethics and mores are formally and informally known by all participants and maintain the structure of the subculture. While some of the rules are individually set based on personal preference, certain mores are the norm that anyone who wanted to participate in the drug trade had to follow as it was understood as good business etiquette. Showing up unannounced was not deemed appropriate by most women, though was normal behavior within the crack market where women were more likely to buy small and frequent quantities needed to maintain their addiction.

All stressed the importance of following the guidelines for speaking in code over the phone and using customs such as shaking hands in a way that made it easy to pass drugs. “Everyone shakes hands when they see each other, that’s why we do it, whether we’re dealing drugs or not.” They also stated they never asked questions about where their suppliers and dealers obtained their drugs, or where their buyers obtained their money.

Asking unnecessary questions was understood by all as dangerous and foolish, and breaking the mores might mean being cut off.

Many of the women considered themselves ethical people, despite the nature of their business. Cheating someone out of drugs or money was asking for trouble. “I always get treated how I want to be treated.” When asked if she ever sold small bags in order to have more drugs for herself, one woman replied, “No, because I was always upfront, honest and never tried to be a shyster, even with the people I dealt with....they were always right there when I weighed it, and they seen and were satisfied with it. I’m not the kind of person to rip people off.”

Most women appeared to have looser boundaries when it came to engaging in other criminal behavior that wasn’t associated with their idea of being a professional drug dealer. Stealing or embezzling from stores or hustling men looking for sex did not conflict with their values but stealing from people they knew was inappropriate.

Reputation

Maintaining one’s reputation was essential to staying in control. Being able to obtain quantities of drugs without having to pay up front was part of doing business for most of the women. Being fronted drugs was based on how well one maintained trust. “...I could get dope no problem, they knew I was good for it because they knew once they gave me some I’d be back for more with money....get me started, she’ll be back all day long. They knew I was a moneymaker.” Having a good reputation was also essential during times when they weren’t doing well and needed help. Explained one woman whose escalating crack addiction included taking care of her children’s addictions: “We dealt with several dope dealers and made them good money. So if I was down and I didn’t have shit, ‘Hey, I need some. You know you’re going to get it back.’ Instead of having that stash in his hand and trying to sell it, he knew, give me a couple of hours, I’ll be back...”

Being cut off meant they had lost their reputation for being able to maintain control and might become a liability to their dealer. One woman described what it was like asking to be fronted drugs after she had lost her reputation. “And they’d be like, ‘No, no, you smoke too much and you’re gonna mess up my money and I don’t want to have to beat you up.’” Others described needing to ensure that their buyers maintained respect for them by setting firm boundaries. “If they got a bad cut from me they knew they were in hot water.”

Maintaining one’s reputation also meant image management. One woman who began selling crack to support her addiction kept her drug use hidden from her suppliers. “At that point I start selling to support my habit so I have all these drug dealers in my house, selling it to me so I could make money. They didn’t know I was smoking, and when they’d leave I’d bring in all the crack heads so I could use their pipes or so they could buy dope from me.”

Having a reputation as someone who always has drugs or can always access drugs was important to maintaining success as a dealer. One woman explained her ability to keep her customers happy. “Everybody knows me and they know I can get dope. And the thing is they know I can get dope after hours like meaning after 10 o’clock at night when most people can’t get any dope.”

Trusting one’s gut feelings

Many women described using their gut feelings to assess a situation for safety or to know how to behave in situations that were rife with shifting undercurrents. Many had had guns put to their heads, experienced physical and sexual violence and had seen their associates and friends arrested. Said one woman: “I was able to assess the situation and know how I needed to conduct myself cause if it was just the regular crowd I’d just kick back and relax. If there was a little bit of tension I was on guard cause that means there could possibly be a fight. If it was all hush hush there was somebody in the crowd that was considered a rat or there was thoughts of that person being considered a rat so everything was done quietly, very, very quietly.”

They described themselves as “smart when it comes to dealing with certain people” and “going with their gut” or “sixth sense” in order to know when to pull out of a deal or when to “close up shop” to avoid being raided. One woman described how she determined when to quit fronting a previously good customer.

“Say you worked at the bank and you’re a good customer...and we get this relationship going and a few months down the road you start knocking at my door in the middle of the night, telling me, ‘Front me, front me,’ I wouldn’t do it...because that tells me that that person is messing up already and really into their addiction really bad.”

Beating the system

Maintaining control ultimately meant not getting arrested. All described precautions they took to avoid getting caught with drugs, especially large amounts of drugs. One woman divided her supply into four locked safes that were kept at her primary workers’ houses. None of the workers knew about each other and none of her friends who bought small quantities from her knew about her large scale dealing.

One woman stated that she maintained a job as a line cook at a fast food restaurant so that she could claim a licit means of income in case she was ever raided by the authorities.

Some described themselves as smarter than the police. Others described techniques they utilized in order to avoid legal charges such as never directly handing drugs or receiving money from someone but rather placing the items on a table to be indirectly picked up. Following the laws while driving and keeping all aspects of their cars in working condition was critical for avoiding a pull-over that might lead to search and seizure. Some felt confident that even if someone “ratted” they might still beat the charges because the person would be too scared to show up to court and testify.

LOSING CONTROL

Losing control happened many times through out the course of these women’s lives. As both a sought experience and one they attempted to minimize, losing control is part of the synthesis of addiction. Stories of losing control are troubling, and included murder and putting a newborn in a duffle bag to sneak out of the hospital before child protective services arrived. The stark symbolism and language used to describe loss of control evokes what Ferrell (1999) calls criminological verstehen, a way of denoting the outsider’s interpretive understanding of the event through the pathos of the emotionally graphic descriptions and events.

Escalating addiction

Using larger and larger amounts of drugs turned what had begun as an exciting venture into a “vicious cycle.” Sometimes they lost the ability to control their addiction altogether. One woman described her late night use, with her son asleep in the other room, dialing 9-1 before injecting, and thinking that if she overdosed she might be able to dial the final 1. Another stated, “My intention wasn’t to sell it. My intention was to use every single last bit of it, and to party on it and to go off on a binge.” They described smoking until they could no longer get high.

Women described losing their jobs, their children and their families. One woman, who cared for her aging mother and was licensed to provide elder care, became unable to function. “The cocaine was ruling me and I couldn’t work so I just went and told my boss that she’s going to have to send somebody else to take care of my mom....I got my paycheck, went and bought a bunch of dope from my friend, went home and never worked again.”

Another woman, who had been in and out of group homes since she was ten and living on the street at the time of her arrest described believing that she would be able to become a big time dealer and have the kind of life for herself that she had always wanted. “...But it didn’t work out that way. I ended up selling drugs and smoking more and more and more...and trying to just see...who wants to buy crack in order for me to get half of the rock so I could get high with them.”

Dealing drugs involved an intense amount of energy, excitement and focus, an experience that mirrored the effects of the drug. The pressures to quickly turn over large volumes of drugs was exhilarating at first, but eventually became difficult to sustain. One woman explained getting deadlines. “...Like this evening you’ve got to get me back, you’ve got to call me this evening, you’ve got to have at least half... And I would hurry up and go hustle up some things....That way they’d trust me more and they’d be able to give me more again.

You know when I started getting all this trust and stuff that's when I started using more and more...and pretty soon I couldn't control it...I was just gross." Said one woman, "You only stay on top for so long and then eventually it takes over you and the profit don't mean anything to you anymore..."

Dissonant feelings

Efforts to gain and maintain control sometimes conflicted with other values, causing deep distress. Fears of getting caught turned to paranoia. The thrill and rush of getting high led to out of control behavior that produced feelings of self disgust. Some felt so ashamed of their behaviors, especially if they had become clean and then relapsed, that they increased their drug consumption and gave up all ties to their children and families.

One woman described her conflict between feeling "like big shit because I was running this and I was doing real good" and concerns for the damage lives she was witnessing. "I started feeling bad because I was watching people's lives going downhill, where I was hearing more stories about people getting so hooked on it, and trying to sell everything that they had, and I felt really bad because there were kids involved." Another woman described the conflict between her self image as respectable and conscientious, and feeling compelled to rob people. "I wasn't that kind of a drug addict. I still had a heart...I was real down and out and I needed to pay this Cuban because he was going to kill me and I needed to do that and it wasn't something I enjoyed doing."

One woman didn't understand why her daughter, who was also addicted to crack, had turned to prostitution, something that she considered degrading. "...I'd give her the crack and she had a place to stay. What was she doing out there? I'd give her dope and she wanted more." Yet another reflected with regret and shame how "quality time" between herself and her child was when he would fall asleep at her feet in the bathroom where she was injecting drugs.

Other illicit behavior

Many of the women had long histories of non-drug criminal behavior, having been introduced to shoplifting by relatives and parents. While some described themselves as professionals or compulsively stealing for the adrenaline rush, most engaged in non-drug crimes as a way to earn money for drugs, especially when they could no longer control their drug consumption enough to sell drugs. "I couldn't sell because every time I'd get a quantity I'd end up smoking it all and paranoid in a hotel room that I was going to get killed because I smoked all the dope." Instead she stole men's pants and wallets after promising sex, which led to four broken noses and being raped when she mistakenly tried to hustle the same man twice in a row.

Several women embezzled from their place of employment and several committed check fraud. Some stole in hopes of bartering for drugs. Explained one, "I'm just so down and out then I would go and shoplift...I would ask them, 'What do you need? Do you need any clothes for your kids? Do you need any clothes for yourself? Do you need anything?'" Another woman described stealing in order to have things to give her children to make up for her failure as a parent.

Unable to take care of self

The women described dangerous weight loss, lack of sleep for prolonged periods, harming their children and smoking until they'd pass out. One woman was afraid she might pass out in an unsafe situation and not be able to wake up for days. "It would get to the point I'd be up for so many days I'd be scared to go to sleep." Another woman described wearing layers of clothes so that if she passed out it would be more difficult for someone to sexually molest her.

One woman who used methamphetamine described going on binges for weeks at a time. "We stayed up straight. No eating, no sleeping, all we're doing is smoke, smoke, smoke the whole time." She described her children as showing the same side effects that she had when there was nothing left to smoke. "We wouldn't smoke in front of them but still the smoke stays in the house..." Many had been unable to stop using while pregnant. One woman described her relapse when eight months pregnant. "...I had 20 rocks and I smoked them all up...and I was just so high I didn't want anyone to see me..."

Falling out of the circle

Losing the sense of belonging and friendship that accompanied participation in the drug network was experienced as a powerful loss for many of the women. Explained one woman, “I thought I was on top of the world until I became just a user and then I wanted to get back in, I wanted to get back in that circle.” Others described how fragile the circle could be. “The common cord was the circle, the dope circle, you know...and as soon as somebody cut that cord and there wasn’t enough dope to go around and everybody wasn’t high then everybody wasn’t happy.”

Some described their hurt feelings when realizing that those they had thought of as friends were not there for them during difficult times. When one woman was wanted by the police for eight months she was ostracized by other users and dealers she had considered friends. “...They were like you can’t be here because the cops – but if I had dope it was okay but as soon as my dope ran out they were like, ‘you’ve gotta leave.’” Another woman described the painful realization that none of her friends were going to visit her in prison. “At the time I thought they were my friends. I took care of them. They took care of me.”

REGAINING CONTROL

Most moved in and out of using and dealing, cutting back and making decisions to use drugs that seemed easier to control. Many of the women had been in rehab before their current program, usually through mandatory sentencing. Stories of regaining control reflected emergent turning points towards desistance or towards achieving a greater and more nuanced control over their addiction. Regaining control was not a return to a base set point but rather part of the trajectory of drug use.

Cutting back

Some experimented with dealing but quit because they were afraid of getting caught only to resume again years later. For those with experience dealing, opportunities to make money continued to present themselves. One woman described going from using and selling methamphetamine to selling marijuana. She missed the money from dealing drugs but couldn’t use because she was receiving UAs. Selling marijuana for her was a reasonable strategy that allowed her to regain some control. Others were able to stop using drugs when they became less available or the quality was poor, and sell without using for periods of time.

Several stated that being pregnant had motivated them to stop using. One woman stopped with both her children and started again after they were born and she believed it was safe to use. Regaining control was often only a temporary stabilization.

Beginning again

Relapse was a common occurrence, experienced by some as a relief from the difficulties of being clean or incarceration. Several described using within hours or days of being released from jail. Beginning again helped them to achieve the empowerment and sense of belonging that they lost by not using. As one woman who described her reasons for dealing again stated, “Because I saw a high demand for it. Like, I started meeting all these people, and, oh man...the stuff that I relapsed on was...awesome, pure, and a lot of people wanted that and not the crappy stuff, and I had it...”

One woman described her disappointment when she became clean but was depressed and didn’t feel better about her life. She began using cocaine again despite her husband’s opposition. “He walked out of the house and I said, ‘Well, let me show him what I’m all about,’ and I started to use. After that it wasn’t up to him whether I used or not.” Another woman described her decision to begin using methamphetamine after having been clean for five years. She weighed 250 pounds and wanted to lose weight but didn’t want to go back to using crack because “I didn’t like that person, and meth was more potent.”

Some began using again despite their intention to stay off of drugs. One woman reflected on her intentions to stay clean after being released from jail and her loneliness and efforts to find friends who were also not using drugs. “...So I figured, well, they’re cool, they’re having their UAs, and that worked for a while, but then we all, you know, eventually relapsed.” Stories of relapse are intricately embedded within the dialectical relationship with control over one’s addiction.

Another was hopeful of beginning a new life but relapsed after her boyfriend was arrested for dealing. “He was part of the reason I wasn’t using anymore because I wanted to be with him...because I wanted my baby, because I wanted to just have a clean life.”

Getting clean

Regaining control involved going to drug treatment when one’s intention was to get clean rather than fulfill a mandatory sentence or a family member’s insistence. One woman described her unwillingness to stop using drugs or change her behaviors until she was caught shop lifting and felt she no longer had control over her addiction. “The guy had to chase me down twice, tackle me twice...that was embarrassing, so embarrassing for me....That day I needed something. I was coming down really bad and I needed a quick something to get me high again.” Another described moving away from the crack scene after losing her first son and finding herself pregnant again. “I just got tired of trying to get high and getting high.... I had so many chances to get him back...and I didn’t want to be a statistic with all my babies in the system.”

Despite having got clean, these women relapsed. Some entered 28-day programs but described them as barely enough time to get sober, or were told to come back in three days after they had detoxed. Explained one, “No, no, you don’t understand. You have to help me now cause I won’t be back in 3 days.” Some took away a lasting change from their rehab, even if they went back to using. One woman proudly recalled the time and date of the last time she used a needle, more than fifteen years ago. Some reflected that if they did use again they would not inject drugs, which they considered the strongest and most addicting form of drug use. Staying clean no matter how temporary was not easy. It meant leaving everything behind and striking out on one’s own.

Getting caught

Many stated that going to jail was the only thing that made them stop and regain some control. Being incarcerated helped to “clear my mind and get my thoughts back” and “start eating again.” Another described being in jail and beginning to laugh again. “It felt good to be able to have a good time, and not have drugs or alcohol to be part of that felt so good.” Others believed that they unconsciously had wanted to get caught in order to get help. They attributed getting caught to purposeful behaviors that they could have controlled such as not missing probation meetings or taking undo risks. Even within stories of losing control, a sense of having some control was part of their self construct.

DISCUSSION

Research on the designer drug Ecstasy has noted a trend of psychoactive drug scenes based on social and friendship networks that may contrast ideas of male dominated and violent inner city drug networks (Jacinto, Duarte, Sales & Murphy, 2008; Sales & Murphy, 2007). The methamphetamine trade appears to more closely follow this kind of social network model than that of other drugs such as crack cocaine. Customers and dealers of methamphetamine were largely described as friends, which helped strengthen connection and identity within the drug trade. They described how their social relationships contributed to the development and maintenance of their addiction and role as dealers, and also to losing control and relapse.

Women in this study were also active distributors of cocaine and crack, and did not describe feeling excluded from accessing higher status within the trade. Their level of success hinged not on their ability to move up in rank but on how well they were able to control their addiction. Women addicted to crack in particular were not able to control their consumption and generally were not able to earn income from dealing. While many methamphetamine users engaged in non-drug crime in relation to the excitement of obtaining free goods and increased drugs, crack cocaine users relied on non-drug crime and sex trade to maintain their habits. Being engaged in non-drug criminal behavior in conjunction with being addicted to drugs was an indicator of escalating addiction and losing control.

Additionally, women in this study who moved into profitable and powerful dealing roles reported burn out, both in terms of their escalating addiction and in terms of their role as dealers. Burn out compromised their positive associations with dealing and was attributed to an inability to control drug consumption, environmental stressors, paranoia from fear of getting caught and losing their children.

Instead, women reported mainly wanting to earn just enough money to buy drugs and meet their basic needs. Though some spoke with reverence for those who were able to make it as “big time dealers,” most had more modest aspirations.

For these women, drugs acted as a connecting bond to other users and dealers, a periphery that encompassed the group, and a currency. Women’s valence to feelings of connection and belonging can not be separated from their sense of self and their relationship with control. Women in this study wanted lives that were exciting and lived according to their own terms, while being strongly connected to others with similar values and goals. These women were outsiders of mainstream society and insiders of a drug subculture with its own symbols, mores and ethics (Golub, Johnson & Dunlap, 2005). The ways in which women navigate the dialectics of control within their lives appears to reflect their sense of self and personal values.

The emergent themes of gaining control, maintaining control, losing control and regaining control can be understood as latent potentials within a dialectical process of homeorhesis rather than homeostasis (Ball, 1979). The flow between these processes was not linear or even circular; nor did it reestablish itself in any kind of equilibrium. Rather, control can be understood as the essence of the relationship these women experienced with the trajectory of their addiction and their efforts to desist from drug use during emergent turning points.

Substance abuse treatment has been speculated as a turning point towards an identity based on legitimate activities when re-entry into the community is accompanied by social bonds (O’Connell, Enev, Martin & Inciardi, 2007). This model may not adequately captures the complex relationship between sense of self and the construction of identity of women in recovery (Giordano, Cerkovich & Rudolph, 2002). Studies of incarcerated men indicate that they are able to experience strong connection to both the criminal community and the community at large, but that it will produce psychological disturbance leading to increased depression, reduced self esteem and increased drug use (Mashek, Stuewig, Furukawa & Tangney, 2006). Women with children and families may experience compelling ties to both the values and mores of the drug subculture and to values and mores of the community at large, producing strong feelings of dissonance.

For women who have experienced relative success through distribution or production of illegal drugs, legitimate work with low wages might seem to be a poor substitute; yet these women’s narratives suggest the relationship is even more complex and personalized. Because women do not always deal drugs in order to achieve status and economic success but rather to fulfill highly individualized goals that may find little recognition or value within mainstream society, women’s underlying needs may be hard to pinpoint. Furthermore, whether the rewards of engaging in licit employment and mainstream society will be commensurate to the powerful neuro-reward of using drugs and operating within the familiar and interconnected realm of the drug culture is a reasonable question to pose.

Maher and Hudson (2007) may be correct in their overall assessment of women as occupying low status roles, especially crack cocaine users; but they and others miss the meaning and context that stem from women’s stories about motivation, reinforcing an outdated script of gender hierarchy that in its self oppresses women’s values and personal choices. The women in this study are more reflective of Joe and Morgan’s (1996) community-based sample of women dealers, where lifestyle and economic contexts of professional pride, ethics and self control informs women’s relationship with dealing drugs. Nevertheless, this somewhat one-sided portrait of women dealers lacks the complex and weighty constellation of problems, dissonant feelings and escalating addictions revealed within the narratives of these women.

The small sample size of this study presents a limitation in terms of generalizability, as does its exclusion of community based drug users and dealers without histories of incarceration. These women had all been arrested for either drug related offenses or illegal behaviors with a direct link to their use of drugs. Patterns of drug use and behaviors have been noted as providing better criteria for distinguishing felon drug users from non-felon drug users than personal characteristics (Semple, Zian, Strathdee, Patterson, 2008). Whether or not there are significant differences in the relationship with control for incarcerated women versus a community sample of women users and dealers would be a worthwhile study.

CONCLUSION

Women's identified motivation to deal drugs is important to understanding why despite access to opportunities within the drug trade for high profits, women consistently reported that they were not interested in becoming "big time dealers" but merely wanted a way to get high and to meet basic expenses. Using and dealing drugs was a shared experience, which can be surmised as more important to women than achieving status within the drug trade.

In contrast to prevailing notions of women occupying either low status roles or having unlimited access to a variety of roles, a third perspective is conceptualized as a dialectic of control, which assumes that shifting dynamics of control is the primary factor that governs patterns of drug use and dealing. Women may find empowerment within the illicit market that they have not experienced in the licit job market of low wages and poor employment opportunity, and employ numerous strategies to maintain control over their chosen lifestyle. However, they are just as likely to lose the empowerment and financial rewards they gained through escalating addictions and loss of control.

Ambivalence is a difficult feeling to tolerate, and no doubt leads to the creation of tidy and positivistic frameworks and models. To try and understand drug use and dealing within a dichotomy of gaining and losing control, or high status and low status, would be an oversimplification of the complex synthesis within an addiction. Functional gains and losses from using and dealing drugs can readily be identified, yet the substantive value tells us nothing about why these women returned to the familiar terrain of using and dealing despite lengthy histories of incarceration, significant and tragic loss, and sometimes years of abstinence.

A dialectic of control emerged from the personal stories women told about using and dealing drugs. Stories, as described by Pugach (2001) "connect us to individuals whose life situations represent ethical or moral or political struggles about which we are enjoined to take a stand" (p.439). Rather than seeing women's failure to achieve drug dealing success as an indicator of a gendered structure within the drug market, a different set of criteria for understanding women's participation must be examined, one that incorporates idiosyncratic and context driven values and motivation mediated through a dynamic relationship with control. Women's own sense of success when defined as having control over their lives and their environment in a complex system of overlapping areas of social, professional and interpersonal facets must be recognized not only to help us move past a limiting and culturally biased perspective that interferes with our ability to recognize the potential empowerment women experience in the drug market, but to help us address the relational, social and community needs of treatment programming (Cohen, Greenberg, Uri, Halpin & Zweben, 2007).

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