Crack: New Directions in Drug Research. Part 2. Factors Determining the Current Functioning of the Crack Economy—A Program for Ethnographic Research

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Abstract

Factors which hypothetically influence rates, volumes, and methods of income generation in crack distribution, use, and misuse are indicated, and a research program to investigate them is suggested. This research will contribute significantly to the development of a theoretical framework which adequately relates substance using/abusing and trafficking populations to the wider community and will explain why crack use and distribution have had such different outcomes than marijuana. Factors to be researched include: polyethnicity, crack-related deculturation, gender differentiation in crack use and effects, neighborhood effects, vertically organized crack-distributing organizations, crack-related violence and crime, and replacement of previous drug markets by crack.
Key words: Factors influencing crack distribution and use; Polyethnicity; Crack-related deculturation; Gender differentiation in crack use and effects; Neighborhood effects

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this paper, the rates, methods, and volumes of income generation in the marijuana economy were contrasted with those emergent in the crack economy. In this part an examination of the following areas of hypothetical importance may generate specific hypotheses and testable statements concerning the sociocultural, political, and economic processes which govern ongoing experimentation in crack distribution and use and concern the structural factors which have shaped specific outcomes, especially as these relate to variable types of income generation.

CRACK DECULTURATION HYPOTHESIS

Our preliminary studies of crack use and distribution have indicated that whereas marked ethnic distinctions were maintained among Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, Hispanic, and Euro-American drug users in low-income New York communities with antecedent drugs, they appear to have been eroded with crack. For example, marijuana trafficking in these communities had become by 1982 the more or less exclusive preserve of Caribbean or Rastafari operators (Hamid, 1983). This development reinforced prejudiced attitudes which these populations harbored against one another. Thus, although Rastafari were grudgingly respected for their conduct of the traffic, they were nevertheless despised on account of their reputed drive to accumulate capital no matter what the sacrifice. Afro-American and Hispanic consumers were despised in their turn because they remained consumers alone, often with ludicrously imprecise knowledge about any aspect of trafficking.

These ethnic contrasts were also expressed in using practices and conventions. Among Caribbean users, marijuana was frequently consumed as the sole stimulant. It was rolled in huge "spliffs" (cigar-sized joints, with raw tobacco leaves—"fromo"—serving as wrappers), in the style of Rastafarians, and was expected to have such effects as serious mindlessness, religiosity, and equanimity. Among Afro-Americans and Hispanics, however, marijuana use was one feature of polydrug use or "get-high" use: wrapped into toothpick-thin "joints," it was consumed in "get-high" gatherings where alcohol, cocaine powder (for snorting), and heroin were also used heavily to promote a "partying" atmosphere.

Among Euro-Americans, marijuana use was also accompanied regularly by the use of PCP, pills (amphetamine, barbiturates, Valium), and the psychedelics (mushrooms, LSD, peyote or mescaline) (Hamid, 1983).

These findings are corroborated by much previous research, especially on marijuana and alcohol, which report clear ethnic and social class differentiations with respect to conventions in use, use patterns, and justifications and beliefs concerning use and trafficking (Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, 1894; Rubin, 1975; Jellinek, 1962; Yawney, 1969, Angrosino, 1972; Hamid, 1976).

Recruitment to drug-using circles continued to take place within single ethnic populations until the advent of smokable cocaine in 1981. When Rastafarian marijuana traffickers initiated freebase use and distribution (see Part One), they reversed the conventions of the marijuana traffic in which a strict separation was maintained between seller and buyer. By admitting their clientele into their selling locations to experiment with the novel procedures of preparing and consuming freebase, they found themselves in the midst of company which was no longer exclusively Caribbean, but included Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Euro-Americans who affected Rastafarian manerisms, speech conventions, dietary codes, dress, and even "dreadlocks." In the mixed company, everyone was obsessed with freebase, and indiscriminate amounts of it were consumed, usually at the seller's expense. In only a few months, several Rastafari marijuana fortunes were destroyed. In the effort to reform these injurious selling arrangements, their successors created a new form of marketing freebase—crack. Preprepared and prepackaged in tiny vials at accessible prices, crack could be sold through heavily barred doors or from the pockets of itinerant street-level help without the seller and buyer joining together in compulsive use.

Distributors in the crack market were quite different from those of marijuana or freebase. They included: Rastafari who had reformed or discontinued freebase and crack use and were now motivated to recapture their lost fortunes; Afro-Americans and Hispanics who had helped Rastafarians to deplete their fortunes and many youthful newcomers—Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, Hispanic, and Euro-American—who often developed variable types of association among themselves in the course of business. Crack selling operations were thus noticeably characterized by polyethnicity, and several specific selling locations were manned by polyethnic personnel.

It is hypothesized that increasing polyethnicity will also have an impact on types and rates of criminal offending and upon the level of violence and degree of cohesiveness manifest in today's distributing organizations. In this regard, ongoing work on gangs offers useful conceptualizations and methodologies for exploring the unique features of recently organized, minority population gangs (Moore et al., 1983). Challenging earlier studies of youth gangs which found that gangs were either tangible entities characterized by much volatility and membership turnover (Short and Strodbeck, 1963) or else permanently established in a territory and in an ethnic population (Suttles, 1968), this work shows how a de-emphasis on territoriality [and in the case of this project's study population, on ethnicity (Hamid, 1987)] places unique strains on individual gang members which may result in a high inci-
dence of violence. The argument is also made that Mexican-American gang members were 2nd and 3rd generation Americans who came from families which had unusually high levels of acculturation. Similarly, contrary to popular belief, “Japanese posse” members are not drafted in East Kingston (Jamaica) and brought here illegally to work in crack “businesses” but are US born youths who may be Afro-American and Hispanic as well as Afro Caribbean. These are youngsters who have been brought together through sharing the same neighborhoods, schools, counselors, coaches, courts, jails, and other such situations. In very similar ways, they have experienced family and household instability, early exposure to parental substance abuse, adult alienation and frustration, their own alienation at school and dropping out, trenched parenthood, participation in the cash economy, and racism. Despite ethnic barriers, therefore, Afro American youth were especially fond of affecting Caribbean speech patterns, particularly those the Rastafarian emphasized. They were fond of reggae music (Rastafarian-inspired Jamaican folk music) and became familiar with Caribbean dress codes and cuisine. They adored the Rastafari: young girls made eyes at them, young boys liked their “reasoning.” Both Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean youth also admired the fact that the Rastafarians were growing wealthy in drug distribution and were using their wealth toward the uplift of African peoples. There were thus many reasons why polyethnic groupings should apprentice themselves to the Rastafarians and eventually succeeded them.

Polyethnicity was especially pronounced in using circles. Crack induces a powerful craving for frequent and repeated readministrations, and this circumstance encouraged cooperation among users who had hitherto remained separate. Quite cohesive groups of users were therefore formed from among Caribbean, Afro-American, and Hispanic persons whose functions included not only crack use, but mutual self-help, the provision of such services as baby sitting, and defense.

MALE–FEMALE (GENDER) DIFFERENTIATIONS IN CRACK USE HYPOTHESIS

Further access to the interconnection between social arrangements and processes and the peculiar circumstances of the crack universe may be provided by concentrating research upon the marked male-female differentiations which seemed to have replaced ethnic variations in crack use (Hamid, 1987). The cohesive polyethnic groups of users and traffickers described above are often single gender groups. This feature was quite noticeable in a population which has long tolerated mixed drinking parties, mixed heroin shooting galleries, and mixed marijuana using sessions. Users refer to the proclaimed effects of crack upon sexuality to explain why women in particular prefer to consume crack among women exclusively. They say that men make sexual advances when they have squandered resources on crack, and are more aggressive and paranoid after use. Besides, many women spend their public transfer incomes on crack and prefer to share it with other women who can make reciprocal contributions from the same dependable source (usually Aid to Dependent Families).

Other processes also work to isolate women or to convert them into a special interest group within the crack phenomenon. For example, there have been many folk attempts to vanquish the universally reported compulsiveness of crack use. A strategy which has been widely adopted by men is to discontinue use of the more intense crack pipe, to use “wulla” joints (cigarettes of marijuana into which finely crushed crack has been admixed) instead, together with some alcohol, and— the necessary ingredient— followed by a $2.00 “blowjob.” This strategy to ensure control and minimal expense therefore depends upon the continuing existence of a large pool of young women who are able to offer sexual services at unusually low prices. Typically, these women are crack users who remain devoted to the crack pipe and who are continuously in need of readministrations.

VARIATIONS BY NEIGHBORHOOD HYPOTHESIS

Striking differences have emerged between neighborhoods with respect to the ways in which crack is sold and consumed, and with respect to types of crack-related crimes and the manner in which they are committed. It is hypothesized that these differences relate to differences in local culture, class, household composition, as well as the physical aspect of the neighborhoods. For example, while two study sites, Flatbush and Central Harlem, are relatively low-income, with high percentages of people receiving public assistance and with many female-headed households, Harlem is primarily Afro-American while Flatbush maintains a more immigrant and Caribbean flavor. In Flatbush, apartment buildings are crowded together and house a more transient population, frequently of more recent immigrants. Here, crime and drug use are at the same time more public and visible, yet contained among kin and neighborhood cliques. In Central Harlem, where rundown apartment buildings are widely interspersed between long stretches of abandoned buildings and garbage-strewn empty lots, drug use and trafficking appear more often as interactions between strangers and chance companions.

A comparison by neighborhood in future research is expected to reveal the agency of some nonstructural factors considered in Part I.

EMERGENCE OF NEW TYPES OF DISTRIBUTORS/DISTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Three new types of distributor/user have been identified in our preliminary observations, in newspaper accounts (New York Times, 1986, 1987), by surveys from the cocaine hotline, and by criminal justice clients and operatives (Criminal Justice Agency, 1987; Wish, 1987). These types are:
Young people who were formerly priced out of regular cocaine hydrochloride use (for snorting) may have been attracted by the cheap initial cost of crack and have become compulsive users who support their habits through distribution.

Marijuana and polydrug users, having added crack to their use patterns, may also support their compulsive use through distribution.

Youths who are entirely neophytes in drug use may have adopted crack as their "gateway" drug; in this regard, well-established stages of onset to alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, pills, cocaine, and heroin may have been deranged by crack.

Some other novel features of contemporary drug distribution which need to be researched include the following.

Some Crack Distributing Organizations May Become "Businesses" Especially Designed for the Rapid Propagation of Crack Use and Distribution

Previous studies of cocaine hydrochloride powder trafficking appear to maintain that the traffic supports only "freelancers" and not long-lasting cooperative distributing organizations, such as those described in the marijuana traffic (Waldorf et al., 1977; Adler, 1985). Our preliminary observations in New York (Hamid, 1987), by Waldorf (1987) in San Francisco, and by Cooper (1987) and by Mieczkowski in Chicago indicate that organizational structures are emerging which may be more centralized and "business" oriented toward cocaine and crack distribution. Researchers in New York are familiar with many former Rastafari marijuana distributors who have lost their marijuana fortunes by initiating crack use and trafficking, but who are able now to control or discontinue use and have returned to trafficking with the determination to regain their lost fortunes (Hamid, 1987). Other organizations comprise youngsters, both Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean, who had apprenticed themselves to these Rastafarians before their downfall, or who grew up recognizing in the Rastafarian attractive role models. "Businesses" organized by such personnel have recently attracted extensive media coverage (New York Times, 1988; Daily News, 1988; Newsweek, 1988) on account of their violent conduct of the traffic. "Jamaican posses" (as they have been called) have reportedly penetrated areas in the United States which had been innocent of crack use, and they have completely dominated drug distribution there.

These data, viewed together with findings in the Mexican-American population in Los Angeles (Moore et al., 1983) and from the studies in San Francisco and Chicago, indicate a nationwide trend toward institutionalization and toward centralization in all nongovernmental sector income generating "businesses." Research on the structure and functioning of such centralized "businesses", their inner organization of roles ("kilo connections," "weight dealers," crack house suppliers and proprietors, security personnel and "hitmen," lieutenants/crewbosses, "runners," "go-betweens," holders of drugs and cash, street sellers, "copmen," steers, touts, lookouts, baggers/packagers, fences, money launderers, "executive personnel," etc.), and how the latter perform in low-income communities will greatly illuminate this trend.

Crack Distribution Is Associated with Unprecedented High Levels of Violence and Nondrug Crime

This researcher is as struck as the general public by the high levels of violence and nondrug crime apparently attributable to crack distribution and use (New York Times, 1987). Some of this violence may be accounted for by the paranoia and fear of harm which users/distributors experience on account of cocaine ingestion perse. Future research, however, will explore the possibility that much violence is the outcome of unique features of the novel crack distribution "businesses." For example, contrary to newspaper accounts, "posses" are by no means exclusively "Jamaican" organizations: their members appear to be drawn from all the islands, and the project team knows of several organizations headed by Caribbean operators which would not be viable but for Hispanic bulk suppliers and Afro-American and Hispanic street distributors/employees." Such organizations, which may not be held together or recruited through ethnicity, kinship, or territoriality, may be subject to peculiar organizational weaknesses or place unusual strains upon individual members which result in violence, rather like gangs in the Mexican-American barrios (neighborhoods) of Los Angeles (Moore et al., 1983). Competition, exacerbated perhaps by unique, crack-specific relations between distributors and consumers, may also promote violence, as may the impact of law enforcement efforts. In future research, therefore, consumer-distributor relations, relations between distribution groups, as well as the impact of changing law enforcement emphases, will be especially investigated.

With respect to the issue of nondrug crime, general relationships between drug use and criminality have been established. Johnson et al. (1987, 1988) have shown that the most serious street offenders appear to be those exhibiting a complex lifestyle which combines routine crime commission in several offense classes (burglary, robbery, theft, fencing stolen goods, etc.); polydrug use (weekly to multiday daily use of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and pills); and drug sales (weekly or more frequent sales and distribution of illicit substances, primarily cocaine, heroin, and marijuana). According to these observers, such serious street offenders will commit one or more nondrug crimes during a typical day, use cocaine and/or heroin and/or marijuana several times, possibly engage in several drug sales, and drink alcohol several times or continuously. An emerging literature suggests that during periods of daily cocaine or heroin use, robbery rates are much higher than when the same persons are using cocaine/heroin on a weekly or less than weekly basis. As
association between "very regular" cocaine/heroin use and high robbery rates is therefore indicated. Robberies were associated with needing both cocaine and heroin. In these studies, however, factors accounting for this connection—depression, craving, paranoia—were not established. Fear of withdrawal, or the experience of it, have been suggested as causes of these criminal acts. Robins found that the greater the number of physical dependency symptoms among Vietnam veterans, the greater the likelihood of a high score on several deviance items.

Widely held among researchers is the belief that drugs, especially alcohol, "cause" deviant behavior, a process by which aggressive behaviors (assaults, fights, sexual deviance) are potentiated and result in crime. This view has proved difficult to test; moreover, it is denied by alcoholic and heavy drinking offenders who say that instead of causing them to lose control, drugs and alcohol enable them to carry out criminal acts more effectively and with greater success (Johnson et al., 1987, 1988).

Future research in this area must account for crack-specific novelties. This researcher and knowledgeable street people believe that crack use has been accompanied by dramatic departures from previous offending, even where it has been drug-related. It appears that successful criminal careers (burglary, robbery, shoplifting, motor car theft, etc.) are often discontinued after onset to crack, to be replaced by a lifestyle which features homelessness, vagrancy, begging, petty larcenies directed against kin and neighbors, and by sporadic violent assault and robbery.

Replacement of Marijuana, Cocaine Powder, and Heroin Distribution by Crack

Adding to the peculiarity of crack distribution organizations and distributors may be the circumstance that crack appears to have dominated drug distribution generally, displacing marijuana, cocaine powder, and heroin distribution significantly (or in the case of heroin, probably dominating and promoting it). A primary focus of future research will be to generate a series of individual drug distribution profiles for study participants (especially those with pre-crack distribution careers, i.e., informants over the age of 30) which illustrate how crack has superseded well-established drug distribution engagements.

The future research efforts which this paper advocates are timely and important. The proper identification of the crack using/abusing and distributing population is crucial to the design of effective treatment modalities for crack dependence. Are they "deviant" or are they (the Boroons, BMWs, and gold chains notwithstanding) the sort of laborers undocumented aliens in sweatshops and farms are? The careful scientific study of crack distribution organizations such as the "Jamaican posses" is the needed response to widespread public concern about their operations. Finally, these new directions in drug research will identify factors which influence income generation and reinvestment in drug economics, and illuminate a vital missing link in explanations which relate the drug universe to the overall community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was written in 1988 as a part of applications to various agencies for funding to initiate crack-specific research.

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