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Gaining Access to Hidden Populations: Strategies for Gaining Cooperation of Drug Sellers/Dealers and Their Families in Ethnographic Research

Eloise Dunlap, PhD and Bruce D. Johnson, PhD

Eloise Dunlap is Project Director, Institute for Special Populations Research, National Development and Research Institutes. Dr. Dunlap is currently Principal Investigator of an ethnographic study that examines violence in drug abusing households. Bruce D. Johnson is Director, Institute for Special Populations Research, NDRI. Dr. Johnson is researching an ethnography of crack distributors/abusers, drug abuse patterns among arrestees and criminals, estimation of hard drug users and operatives, and an analysis of new drug detection technologies

Summary

This article examines strategies for gaining the cooperation of drug sellers and their families in order to conduct ethnographic research. The strategies were developed during an eight year study of drug dealers in New York City. A key element in gaining the ability to talk with and observe drug dealers and their family members was the availability of funds to compensate respondents for interviews and other expenses associated with building and maintaining rapport. Access to more successful crack sellers and dealers rested upon the right contacts. The “right contact” is a critical element.

Locating a trusted “go-between” was adapted from strategies employed by cocaine sellers to arrange transactions involving large quantities of drugs. Such transactions rely upon a trusted associate of a dealer, the “go-between,” who performs various roles and assumes risks the dealer wishes to avoid. The role of the go-between became important when ethnographers attempted to reach drug dealers for research purposes.

Favors and trust are central components in the *equation* of access to the dealer and his family. Favors are a part of drug dealers' interaction patterns: everyone owes someone else a favor. Such reciprocity norms exist independently of the amount of drugs involved and outlast any particular transaction. Reputations and favors are related. This framework of favors, trust, and reciprocity provides a basis for the ethnographer to gain an introduction to dealers and sellers. The “go-between” is critical because he/she explains the ethnographer's role to the dealer and helps arrange an initial meeting between the ethnographer and the seller. Once the go-between has provided an initial introduction, the ethnographer marshals the communication skills necessary to convince the dealer to allow further contact and conversations.

This article examines the ritual of initial conversation within its cultural framework. Developing rapport requires showing respect and honesty. Since drug dealers' self-esteem and prestige is generally tied to their drug dealing activities, signs of respect are critical in obtaining repeated appointments and conversations. Issues such as levels of rejection and how to use apparent refusal to the ethnographer's advantage are discussed. Gaining access was broken into two components. One involved permission to engage dealers in in-depth interviews. The next involved obtaining permission to directly observe the actual activities of selling. Both of these components were important elements in gaining access and permission to conduct research. Building and maintaining trust and rapport were related to issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

Ill-fated ethnographic strategies, such as relying on street drug users for introductions, were important stepping stones to those strategies that did work. Such strategies revealed the level of interaction between dealer and user. They helped to uncover drug subculture behavior patterns and conduct norms and to tease out the relationship between the dealer and user. Such strategies also revealed hierarchical arrangements and the loyalty within such levels. Those near the top of dealer hierarchies generally are reluctant to introduce their boss (those above them in rank) because of fear of reprisals, a sense of responsibility to the individual boss, or/and a sense of loyalty to the organization. The strategies laid out were experienced in New York and may be adjusted to acquire access to hidden populations in other situations.

Introduction

Conducting ethnographic research in inner-cities presents difficulties rarely encountered elsewhere. Gaining access and conducting research in most modern institutions is relatively easy; few dangers to the ethnographer are present, and facilitators are usually easily found. Research among drug sellers/users in inner-cities, however, presents impediments rarely encountered with other study populations. Attempting to walk into a drug-dealing area to do research without proper preparation or introduction could be very dangerous for the ethnographer.¹

Crack sellers, and especially cocaine dealers (those buying at or near the kilogram level—Johnson, Hamid, & Sanabria, 1991), have numerous reasons for concealing their identity from all but a few of their most trusted associates, denying any involvement in illegal sales of cocaine or crack, and being deeply suspicious of virtually anyone and everyone who may wish to meet them. Remaining “hidden” or “anonymous” to outsiders and “hiding” most of their behaviors from family, friends, and associates are standard operating procedures for most crack sellers and dealers. Any ethnographer or researcher who wishes to study the behaviors and lifestyles of crack sellers/dealers confronts enormous problems in gaining access to key persons immersed in crack/drug selling.

This article discusses the more successful strategies developed during two major ethnographic studies designed to study this elusive and hidden population of crack and cocaine sellers/dealers and households. The main focus is upon the various strategies staff employ when attempting to gain the cooperation of crack sellers/dealers and their families at different levels. Topics covered are: (1) role of incentives, (2) the critical importance of the right “go-between,” (3) favors and trust as a central expectation among drug sellers, (4) conveying the ethnographer role via a “go-between,” (5) ritual of initial conversation, (6) cultural aspect of developing rapport, (7) research access after the initial conversation; (8) building and maintaining trust and rapport; (9) importance of confidentiality and study purpose in gaining initial access, and (10) ethnographic strategies that did not work well. Over the years, the strategies outlined here have been the most effective in gaining access to inner-city drug sellers and dealers as well as their families. Strategies which did not work well are also provided.

Virtually every text book on qualitative research methods devotes extensive discussion to gaining access to and the cooperation of potential research subjects (see Hughes, 1971; Harris, 1974; Barrett, 1984; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987; Fetterman, 1989). This research builds on that strong tradition. However, few studies delineate the strategies that did not work and why. This paper includes such a discussion to enhance knowledge of gaining access to hidden populations.

¹Williams et al. (1992) delineated several strategies developed to protect the personal safety of ethnographers, research staff, potential subjects, and other persons in the crack selling environment. Following such safety strategies and procedures is directly relevant to, and should be incorporated into, the strategies delineated in this article for gaining “access” for research purpose to crack sellers/dealers and their families. Also please note that names used in examples and excerpts from field notes are pseudonyms.

The strategies that work for staff will be discussed first. This discussion will be followed by a discussion of special problems that can arise and strategies that do not work.

Methodology

This article compiles experience from two large-scale ethnographic studies.² All strategies were used primarily among inner-city minority communities where crack selling became a major career activity (Manwar, Dunlap, & Johnson 1994; Johnson, Williams, Dei, & Sanabria, 1990). Although heroin distributors and marijuana sellers were included, crack/cocaine distributors and users were the focus of these two studies. Their activities were observed and information recorded in field notes. Over 296 crack distributors and 20 households were carefully selected as key informant-subjects, gave informed consent, and participated in in-depth interviews. The “Crack Distribution/Abuse” sample consisted of 63% males and 37% females. African-Americans at 78% were the sample's majority, Hispanic were 16%, and whites, 6%. The “Household Violence” sample consisted of over 54 family members from 20 families. Subjects for both studies were recruited from Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx.

Role of Incentives

A key element and resource available in both research projects is the availability of funds to pay respondents for interviews and other expenses associated with building and maintaining rapport (e.g., food, meals, etc.). Stipends signal subjects that they are perceived to be equals,³ and the information they provide is important. Stipends and the ethnographers' ability to buy food for families are particularly important for developing rapport with families. Many times, subjects called the ethnographer and asked for food for the family. In such cases, the ethnographer was able to see more of family life. Food also facilitated the ethnographer's access to children of all ages in the family. The children and other family members began to see the ethnographer as a friend and someone who genuinely cared about what happened to the family, especially during times of crisis, such as shortages of food.

Additionally, the ethnographer provided children with coats to wear in the winter; their parents did not have the money to buy such clothing for school. Since the parents are often involved in drug consumption, money received by the parents is not usually used for family necessities. In most cases, money earned by drug selling is spent to purchase drugs; in other cases, individuals are paid in drugs and do not receive money. In all instances, most of the money acquired by parents is not used for household essentials. The minimal funds received from welfare and low-paying employment do not cover the monthly necessities. In many instances, parents' frustration with their inability to provide the bare necessities of family life encourages spending the limited amounts on drugs.

In all instances, field expense money and payments for interviews are critical in the development of rapport: In many poor inner-city communities, friendships are based upon a balance of trust (see Stack, 1974). Friendship is very important; sharing what one has enables these families to exist when monies are insufficient to cover expenses. Friendship helps to fill gaps in income; friends help when something is needed. If the subject is giving information and has opened his/her family life to the ethnographer, there is an expectation that something should be given in return. When an ethnographer develops rapport with individuals as well as families, even when the friendship is in the early stages, some subjects begin to rely quickly upon the ethnographer, expecting advice. Thus the buying of food, purchasing needed articles,

²“Natural History of Crack Distribution/Abuse” was an eight-year research effort intended to collect in-depth information on the structure, functioning, and economic aspects of cocaine and crack distribution in New York City. “Violence in Crack User/Seller Households: An Ethnography” was a three year study specifically designed to examine the intergenerational processes and transmission of violence.

³Refer to section on culture.

attending funerals, and buying flowers for funerals, weddings, and birthdays are important ways to grow more intimate with family members and individual subjects, and to learn more about family life than one ordinarily would discover.

The availability of monetary incentives is very important to all drug sellers. Such funds are critical for creating the “possibility” of approaching high level dealers; but such payments are rarely the only consideration or the most important reason that dealers choose to cooperate.

The Critical Importance of the Right “go-between”

Project staff quickly learned that research access to the more successful crack sellers and dealers is effectively closed without the “right” contacts. In fact, successful dealers always limit their contact with “outsiders.” The following strategies for gaining research access to crack sellers and dealers are adapted from parallel strategies employed by cocaine sellers to arrange specific transactions—especially those involving more than a thousand dollars (in money or drugs). Most such transactions began with a potential buyer locating a “go-between” who is a trusted associate of a dealer who could supply large quantities of cocaine.

Drug sellers rely heavily on go-betweens to perform a variety of roles and assume risks that the dealer wishes to avoid. Upper-level dealers typically use a variety of persons in various go-between roles. Many dealers hire individuals to perform roles that buffer the seller from the risks of selling. For example, a lieutenant transports and is responsible for drugs and money between the dealer and his sellers. Drug dealers intentionally interact with limited numbers of very trusted people. Dealers' interactions are limited to those known personally and to their workers who are expected to conceal the seller's true identity from outsiders. Ethnographers may imitate such tactics by seeking a go-between to initially approach drug sellers. The role of go-between is extremely important when attempting to reach drug dealers for research purposes. But the specific person must be carefully chosen and advised or trained by the ethnographer. To contact, meet, build rapport with, and interview a dealer, ethnographers need to be “properly introduced” by a “trusted associate” who functions as a go between (Dunlap et al., 1990; Williams et al., 1992). A “trusted associate” is personally known by and has good relations with the potential subject, who is a seller or dealer. Acquaintances such as former school mates, former jail/prison inmates, former sellers, and so on, may be excellent persons to fulfill the role of go-between. Former drug dealing associates and former prison inmates often have good contacts and know many drug dealers. Other people in the drug business, including many drug dealers, know their “reputations.” Cross-cutting and outside the drug business are various family members, kin, and old school mates. Such persons may have higher credibility and may be trusted by the dealer to some degree. Several important nuances are involved in finding a trusted associate and having him/her function as a go-between.

Favors and Trust as a Central Expectation Among Drug Sellers

Because dealers often rely on go-betweens, “favors” are a normal part of their interaction patterns. A key feature of the drug business and an expectation among all in seller roles is that everyone owed someone else a favor. Strong norms of reciprocity exist. People could not survive in sales roles if they did not reciprocate. In the past, Dealer A may have introduced Dealer B to a good supplier, so B now owes a favor to Dealer A. Most dealers owe favors to other dealers and suppliers based upon numerous contacts from many previous transactions. Sellers also owe favors to those who have brought steady customers and/or those who purchase large amounts. Such favors between two persons exist independently of the amounts of drugs or dollars involved in—and long after—the specific transactions are completed.

Persons with several prior years of selling acquire good street “reputations” among a wide network of dealing acquaintances—because they reliably give and receive favors—as the basis

for a degree of “trust” that is always relative in the drug business. While nobody is trusted entirely, high-level (kilogram) dealers typically have only a few persons who are trusted in their judgment of other persons and about whom to sell cocaine. A key element among this network of crack sellers and dealers is a recommendation from another trusted associate that a new person is “OK and not a cop,” and “will not harm your business” (as would a competitor). The following fieldnotes demonstrate the importance of trust, and how low level sellers like Isabella often “mess up.”

Isabella talked about problems with her dealer. She tried to make some extra money by “tapping” the vials of crack, that is, taking a little crack from each vial and making other vials; thus, she had more to sell and could make more money. Her friend was to do the tapping, but her friend smoked the crack, put plaster in the vials, and gave them to Isabella to sell. Customers complained to Isabella's dealer; he checked Isabella's crack and found it was plaster. He was very angry, fired her, and she owed him a large sum of money. She has paid her debt down to \$40.

She feels very bad about getting caught; her reputation for trust and dependability has been crushed. This dealer will not let her sell for him anymore because he does not trust her. Among dealers, trust is very important; a person's reputation is like money in a bank. Other dealers quickly learned of Isabella's actions and would not trust her to sell after she lost credibility with her regular dealer. She says it will take her a long time to build back the trust. She cannot blame the dealer for not trusting her; it was her fault for trusting her friend. Isabella's regret over the situation was intense. She repeatedly stated that it would take her a long time to build trust back up but that she would do it. She claimed to be basically a trustworthy person, who does not “mess with nobody's drugs or money.”

This framework of favors, trust, and the lack of trust among dealers provides the basis for the ethnographer to gain a proper introduction to dealers. But if not handled properly, finding the right person to function in may occasionally participate in the conversation, the focus for the ethnographer is the respondent's replies and questions. Generally, after the potential dealer-subject meets, converses, and feels comfortable with the ethnographer, the go-between likely will not attend future meetings.

Ethnographers have specific outcomes in mind that start with the initial conversation. The overall objective is to develop rapport and trust so that the dealer will eventually open up his/her private world, dealing activities, and family life to the ethnographer. An important first step is to take the mystery out of the ethnographer's role. This involves a discussion about ethnography. Generally, a conversation about oneself helps to ease the respondent's apprehensions and separate the ethnographer from law enforcement.

What Fine (1993) described as the kindly, friendly, and honest ethnographer is a good stance to adopt. Presenting oneself as someone who can be trusted with vital and damaging information is helpful. Staff usually display such virtues as openness and honesty. One important criterion is that the ethnographer should never enter the field with preconceived ideas about any specific behaviors a dealer may practice (e.g., violence) besides the focal activity of interest (e.g., dealing). Since drug dealers can identify insincerity and concealment quite rapidly, ethnographers need to present an honest face. By taking an open and honest stance, the ethnographer exposes ethnography and the individual ethnographer for scrutiny, providing the basis to build rapport.

A key element for a successful initial conversation is to get the potential respondent to talk at some length about any topic of his/her choice. The longer the respondent talks, the better are the chances to build rapport. In general, the ethnographer pays attention to the dealer's language and expressions by listening for key words, word usage, and ideas. Responses are framed within

the context the dealer develops by using similar words and expressions and, to some extent, reiterating what the dealer has said.

Cultural Aspect of Developing Rapport

Development of rapport is accomplished at multiple levels. At each level, an understanding of African-American culture is important. For African-Americans, the highest value is in the relationship between two persons (Nicholas, 1976). Since the relationship is primary, the desire is to keep it intact. This concept of relationship is connected to dealer's ideas and behaviors around respect and disrespect. If the highest value is "relationship," individuals see each other as equal. To treat someone as less than equal reflects a disrespect for the individual. In African-American culture, to treat another as less than equal destroys relationship; such behavior is disrespectful. Although individuals may out rank one another, the expectation is still to be treated equally.

Such a value system requires dealing with each person on an individual basis. People have to work to establish and maintain individual one-on-one relationships. Understanding such cultural differences is important when the ethnographer attempts to develop any level of rapport among an African-American population. The first rule, then, is to demonstrate interest in each subject on an individual basis. Subjects must be made to feel that they are seen as equal, respected, and have much to teach the ethnographer. An interest in the individual and his/her life must be demonstrated on an *individual* basis. Dealers place much emphasis upon respect, and adopting this stance will be rewarded by entry into the subject's world.

Showing "Respect" and Successful Research Among Dealers

"Respect" has many elements. Drug dealers are often isolated from the dominant society in inner-city communities. Their limited interactions with the society are through social control and penal institutions. The dealing world also is fraught with danger, schemes, fear of arrest, lack of job opportunities, poor education, and so on. Even though some dealers make a substantial amount of money for awhile, their opportunities and living standards remain linked to the bottom of the American system of stratification. Most dealers find it difficult and next to impossible to move beyond their underclass status. In such circumstances, showing "respect" for them as persons is important in part because the ethnographer is likely to be the only conventional and "straight" person to do so.

Dealers' sense of self-esteem and prestige is generally tied to their activities as drug dealers. In their world, signs of disrespect are cause for some reciprocal action (Dunlap & Johnson, 1996). The ethnographer shows respect by paying close attention to the person's culture, language, expressions, and thinking patterns. Recreating the conversation demonstrates that the listener-ethnographer carefully noticed what was expressed, had some familiarity with their world, and most of all was sensitive to their plight.

Additionally, wanting to hear more about the respondents' views and life also expresses a deep sense of respect and interest in the person. The ethnographer might suggest reversal of usual roles by taking the stance of the student and invite the dealer to assume the role of teacher. The dealer is invited to teach the ethnographer about the dealer's world and way of living. Through such strategies at building initial rapport, respondents likely conclude that the ethnographer is truly an open and honest person and the dealer's views will be presented in a fair manner. In many instances, dealers wanted their story told and to have someone write about their experiences.

To avoid being perceived as an authority figure, the ethnographer locates topics of conversation that might be shared within the dealer's world. In a reasonably inclusive manner, the

ethnographer should find ways of being agreeable towards the dealer's position regardless of how ridiculous such ideas might appear by conventional standards. Absolutely nothing the dealer respondent does or says should be called "wrong," "dumb," or "stupid." The ethnographer never expresses negative opinions about anything in the dealer's world unless the dealer says it first. The primary effort during the initial conversation is to achieve concord with the dealer.

Research Access After the Initial Conversation

Once the ethnographer, the dealer, and go-between complete their introduction and the initial conversation, dealers receive the ethnographer in different ways. There are those who want to tell their story to the ethnographer and to the "outside world." Such desires prompt cooperation from the respondent dealer. Enthusiasm from a dealer subject is good, but too much enthusiasm means that the ethnographer could become consumed by the demands of that person (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). One dealing family in the "Natural History of Crack Distribution/Abuse" became so comfortable with the ethnographer that they called each time a crisis occurred in the family. Such crises occurred regularly, were highly informative about family processes and tensions, and contributed much to the research process. The ethnographer devoted large amounts of time to the family and their crises. Their enthusiasm about participation in the study gave the ethnographer a chance to observe and record much data about ordinary family life and interpersonal interaction patterns among sellers, prostitutes, and other family members (Dunlap, Williams, & Johnson, 1997).

A cordial reception, on the other hand, can expose the ethnographer to accept much peripheral data just to remain on good terms with the person(s) (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). Nevertheless, observations and field notes written regarding apparently unrelated topics often provide fertile new areas of investigation; what initially appeared to be "pursuit of the tangential" and serendipity can become linked to the major phenomena of investigation (Johnson & Lipton, 1980).

One common outcome of the initial introduction might be called "benign neglect." The dealer's attitude may range from friendly tolerance to indifference (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). In some cases, benign neglect might be the best for which the ethnographer can hope. A dealer may sit and listen to the ethnographer but does not give appropriate or detailed responses. In such instances, arranging future appointments will permit necessary time to "gradually break the ice." The ethnographer may encounter rejection (e.g., sellers or dealers decline to cooperate); however, past experience has shown that hostility is rare. Partial or indirect rejection is common.

In the above studies, some dealers have rejected in-depth interviews but have compromised by permitting the ethnographer to interview workers or to remain in a crack spot. Staff often found it difficult to gain full cooperation in ethnographic research of crack dealers and suppliers at their business locations. For example, Isabella sold crack for a dealer from her apartment. She gave many hours of interviews and permitted the ethnographer to observe what happened in her crack house. She explained many behaviors of crack smokers and dealers. Isabella also attempted to introduce the ethnographer to her supplier/dealer who spent much time in the apartment and often had seen the ethnographer. Isabella was able to convince her dealer to have a conversation with the ethnographer. The initial meeting and conversation went successfully, and he promised he would participate in the study. However, he left the ethnographer sitting in the crack house for many hours waiting for him while he associated with his personal friends and, in general, took care of his business.

Thus, the ethnographer had the dealer's verbal consent to participate, but his business activities, girlfriend, and suspicions resulted in avoidance. The ethnographer was able to continue

observations at the crack house, and the dealer made no indication to Isabella or others that he disapproved of the study or the ethnographer's presence. But he also remained wary, busy, and reticent about an interview. The major problem was to disengage him from "business" and other persons in his life, especially his girlfriend.

When staff did experience limited rejection by dealers, this was often perceived as due to the "low" reputation of the go-between (like Isabella) who made the introduction. Sometimes initial rejection later became a welcoming situation when another go-between with a good reputation was found and spoke on behalf of the ethnographer. If the ethnographer finds a way to surmount the obstacle of initial rejection, field work in the area can continue. Whether the ethnographer, when introduced to the potential subject/dealer, encounters enthusiasm, benign neglect, or complete rejection, the situation has to be handled with professional sophistication so that rapport may develop.

The case of George, a crack dealer who had several sellers working for him, provides an example of the ethnographer surmounting obstacles. One of George's sellers introduced the ethnographer to George. Not understanding confidentiality issues and unsure whether to trust the ethnographer, George introduced the ethnographer to a female crack seller who was a college graduate in psychology.⁴ Building rapport and gaining her trust did not take long. She was outgoing, and she was friendly with many other crack sellers in the neighborhood, though she did not work for or with them. With her subsequent recommendation, George became an active respondent. She also assured other "fellow entrepreneurs" that legitimate research was being conducted and encouraged them to participate. Thus, initial rejection of the ethnographer can be turned into acceptance if the ethnographer can "tough it out" and find new go-betweens.

In other situations, however, the ethnographer may find it more practical to leave one setting and set of potential subjects and seek other dealer-subjects. Another example in which a dealer's initial rejection was overcome came a year later. Marva, an upper level dealer, was approached for participation. Similar to George (Isabella's dealer), Marva was apprehensive at first and declined to become a key subject or be interviewed, but she had no objection to her crew participating in the research. Marva's crew included her daughter and her sister Rita. Rita was recruited as a subject and gave several interviews. Two other persons from Marva's crew were also recruited. Over the course of a year, numerous and lengthy interviews and observations of Marva's and their selling behavior took place. After a year of observing the ethnographer, Marva was assured that no harm or difficulty would occur as a result of an association with the ethnographer. She subsequently agreed to become a key subject in the research and was interviewed on several occasions.

Access to the Dealing Locales

Gaining access to a dealer also involves obtaining permission to directly observe the actual activities associated with selling. As Isabella and Marva demonstrated, the dealer may permit the ethnographer access to workers and dealing locales but may be hesitant to participate in the interview process. In both instances, selling took place inside. Street sellers do not want untrusted people to be present for long periods of time at their distribution site. They temporarily desist from selling activities when suspicious persons enter the block. They permit suspicious persons to enter and pass through, but a person who attempts to strike up a conversation and *not* buy drugs is reason for great suspicion since the individual may be an undercover cop. A critical level of initial access is to gain permission to be present while selling activities are on-going. A second level of access permits the ethnographer to make multiple

⁴With Rachel's approval and cooperation, the ethnographer's personal safety was secured in the area (Williams et al., 1992) and much important information about her drug selling career has been subsequently published (Manwar et al., 1994; Dunlap & Johnson, 1995).

visits to the same setting. In addition to securing a dealer's individual willingness to participate in the research, the ethnographer also needs to gain permission to make direct observations of selling activity by other(s) the dealer may employ. As Marva and George permitted observations but denied the interview, some sellers denied permission to observe customers and actual transactions but provided extensive interview data (Manwar et al., 1994). Again, the ethnographer's access must not endanger the dealer, the go-between, other street sellers, or the ethnographer. Other participants on the scene also must feel safe (not endangered) by the ethnographer's presence. The seller's "safety zone" must be extended to include the ethnographer (Williams et al., 1992). In specific cases, crack customers may hold respectable jobs, and their identity has to be protected (see Manwar et al., 1994).

Building and Maintaining Trust and Rapport

The first meeting with an individual dealer is a critical first step toward gaining rapport and full acceptance to study and observe dealing activities. If this initial foundation is weak or unstable, the ethnographer needs to spend more time and effort to build a relationship of trust and confidence. When and if a strong foundation is established in the initial meeting(s), the ethnographer begins his/her field research. In subsequent meetings, emphasis is placed upon the dealer-respondent's life and work.⁵ The general idea is to introduce non-threatening conversations about dealing that renders the dealer comfortable talking to the ethnographer.

Developing strong rapport means having and showing respect and an interest in the person's beliefs, opinions, experiences, and world views, so that the subject is at ease with the ethnographer's intentions. Acquiring friendships with and developing excellent rapport also entail helping people to do things that they may not know how to accomplish. For example, one crack seller subject, Ross, was interested in playing basketball. But he had been shot several years earlier. He was unable to use the lower part of his body and used a wheelchair to get around. Although he could not use his legs, he was a very active and independent person who desired to participate in sports. He had heard of handicapped teams that played basketball. When he divulged this wish to the ethnographer, she went to a community program in the area and talked with the director about starting a basketball team for men who had been injured and had various physical handicaps. The director was interested in starting such a program, but there was an insufficient number of handicapped people in the area who were interested in participating in sports, and the idea was thwarted. Although no team resulted, Ross believed that the ethnographer had done him a favor, she was sincere, and he could trust her to do what she said would do.

The ethnographer also assisted other potential subjects in inner-city neighborhoods in many ways. Performing such services was an effective way to develop and strengthen rapport with respondents. Information on hospitals, treatment, and detoxification programs was often useful. Staff attended funerals, delivered funeral messages when the pastor did not arrive, visited persons in the hospital, bought food, rented videos, and contributed to helping in times of need in numerous ways. Benevolent concern can lead to friendship, a high degree of trust, and acceptance of the ethnographer's participation in everyday life.

Confidentiality and Study Purpose in Gaining Access

The issue of confidentiality and anonymity is especially important for encouraging crack sellers to participate in ethnographic research. Overcoming the well-founded suspicions of crack sellers is critical to research. Concerns about the ethnographer being an undercover agent or

⁵Showing a keen interest in the dealer's stamina and capacity to survive helped to build rapport by stressing the need for creativity and business management. In subsequent meetings, research emphasis is placed upon the dealer's ability to survive in a dangerous world successfully. This introduces and prepares the dealer for future conversations about his/her activities and what they may encompass.

about the data being seized for enforcement purposes have to be alleviated before potential dealer-subjects feel free to talk about their dealing activities. After establishing a level of friendship and rapport, staff emphasize the numerous procedures to be followed in protecting the anonymity of individuals and confidentiality of data.

Complete confidentiality is stressed and assured to potential respondents. No personal identifying information about the person, or any persons mentioned, dealing activities nor dealing places can be given to any law enforcement personnel or other government agencies. All information is kept strictly confidential and used for research purposes only. Respondents are informed that the research is protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. This certificate is taken into the field when doing research and is shown to potential subjects (see details in Williams et al., 1992). Plans by the research project to assure confidentiality (i.e., pseudonyms, code numbers, locked files) are explained carefully. The ethnographer invites the individual to choose a code name for the research that they would like to be known by. One request of the ethnographer is that dealers and subjects use code names for acquaintances, places, and other personally identifying information when talking about their activities. Other methods of concealing the person's identity such as code numbers are discussed and clarified. The length in time (years) the research will take place, the length of various interviews, and the amount of time the information gathered will be kept on file is covered.

Finally, the subject's right to drop out of the study at any time has the positive effect of encouraging participation. Stressing that persons have the privilege, once they begin, to change their minds if they do not feel comfortable, demonstrates that the subject is not obligated to continue in the study. In short, emphasizing confidentiality, explaining the study, stressing the rights of subjects, steps to assure anonymity, the nature of confidentiality, and freedom to discontinue participation in the study aids in encouraging participation.

Likewise, clarity about the objectives of the study and what it entails, what it seeks to understand, what is expected of the person as a respondent, the kind of information sought, and the outcome or final product of the information collected is discussed with the respondent in detail. In such discussions, the potential subject was given enough information so that he/she could understand what his/her role in the research might be and could ask questions about anything which was not understood. Their questions were answered as clearly and honestly as possible and in language understandable to them. They could then give their fully informed consent and become a willing participant in the study.

Ethnographic Strategies that did Not Work Well

In the crack business, having money to pay respondents for interviews meant that eager subjects were always available (Johnson et al., 1985). Those most eager to volunteer were often the crack users and those least competent as drug sellers. Since the study phenomena was crack selling, persons who routinely sold crack were sought as key subjects. The ethnographer therefore must rapidly learn the various roles and functions performed by participants. Indeed, knowing street roles greatly assisted in the process of initial identification of individuals and activities taking place in drug dealing areas. With such knowledge, the ethnographer more easily identified individuals performing various roles in a "copping" area. Generally, persons willing to communicate with anyone entering a dealing area will be limited to those performing roles of low level distribution and those helping to generate sales. At the beginning of the project "Natural History of Crack Distribution/Abuse," various strategies were utilized to identify crack sellers and dealers. As the project progressed, such strategies were sharpened and refined.

Do Not Expect Crack Users to Help Identify Crack Sellers

One ill-fated strategy was to rely upon crack (or other) drug users to introduce ethnographers to crack sellers or their suppliers. At the inception of the project, when no sellers were known, ethnographers planned to use a variation of the mix and mingle approach (Fetterman, 1989).

Popeye initially appeared friendly and helpful. He talked to ethnographers, walked them through the area, and explained various phenomena. He pointed out crack spots and talked of his experiences selling and using crack. He promised to meet the ethnographers the next day to introduce them to his mother and to act as a go-between. Popeye claimed he knew many dealers and that he could introduce the ethnographers to them.

The next day, however, when ethnographers went to meet him, he was nowhere to be found and persons to whom he introduced the ethnographers on the previous day claimed they did not know Popeye—and further that they had never met the ethnographers. To make matters worse, the police entered the area at the same time that the ethnographers entered the area, making it appear as though the ethnographers were associated with the police.

Popeye turned out to be an ex-crack seller whose deeds had rendered him untrustworthy in the drug distribution business. Usually, long-time crack users like Popeye have ruined or undermined their “reputation” in street life. Even when a street seller or crew boss hired someone like him, they were watched closely and were never trusted with large amounts of drugs to sell. Many could not be trusted with either drugs or money and were so untrustworthy that they worked as “look-outs,” “steerers,” “touts,” or other low level distribution roles (Johnson, Hamid, & Sanabria, 1991).

Popeye survived through serving in the role of “steerer.”⁶ When ethnographers met him, he was looking for customers. Therefore, crack users and low level distributors generally are not trusted, and have little knowledge of, or access to high-level dealers.

Meeting and Gaining Initial Access to Crack Users and Lower Level Distributors

Ethnographers could rapidly meet and gain access to crack users and lower level distributors, but converting steerers, touts, lookouts, and like persons into reliable subjects, and especially reliable go-betweens, was most unlikely. Popeye's openness indicated that he had been looking for customers. He was willing to tell his story, what he knew about crack, his experiences, and show us various “copping places” (locales to purchase crack/cocaine). The relationship the ethnographer was trying to acquire with Popeye was undermined by him giving a false address and not returning at the time and to the place agreed upon. Such fleeting relationships were frequently encountered.

Popeye illustrates some of the many difficulties in locating and developing rapport with crack users. The failure to meet with the ethnographer again, and to not keep appointments is a chronic and continuing behavior pattern evidenced by many crack users. Crack users are generally “hustling” and looking for a quick way to make money or gain food, but promises of future cooperation and assistance are often not met. Most live for the moment without making consistent commitments about the future. They do not plan ahead as ordinary persons do. Conducting research among such a population then requires much tolerance and persistence to relocate a potential subject.

⁶A *tout* is a person who hawks a specific seller's drugs. A *steerer* helps people coming into the neighborhood to purchase drugs; he guides the buyer to purchase drugs. Popeye got customers by touting for the Dominicans in the area. Often the tout or steerer will transport drugs and money between buyers and sellers who never meet.

After a few encounters with crack users like Popeye, staff learned that more often than not, crack users and low level distributors actually *cannot* facilitate introductions to sellers or dealers. Most sellers and dealers avoid social contact, other than specific sales transactions, with crack users; they distrust them. Most sellers and dealers also avoid the company of the low-level distributors who sometimes work for them or buy drugs from them. While dealers and sellers are known by many purchasers and users, the relationship is limited to a brief exchange of money for drugs. Persons who only buy crack rarely become a “trusted associate” of the seller and so cannot “get to” a dealer on the basis of a personal favor.

The Limitation of Drug Selling Hierarchies on Low-Level Distributors and Workers

Drug selling hierarchies limited low-level distributors and workers to specific roles and denied them access. Within well-organized cocaine selling organizations (especially those involved in transporting cocaine from Colombia and New York), many persons are “employed” at various times to perform vital roles, but they are systematically not informed about the whole operation of which they are a part.

The story of John, an ex-dealer who was also a “mule,” demonstrates this limited access to information, the obstacles researchers encounter when they attempt to enlist upper-level drug dealers as respondents, and the tightly-knit character of drug organizations. Behavior patterns that govern organizations can reach beyond the period of employment to personal relationships between the organization and former employees well after employment ends. John freely talked about various aspects of “organizational distribution,” but he flatly refused to introduce ethnographers to the individuals for whom he had worked. He talked about the structure of the dealing organizations by describing certain key roles he had held. His key role was that of “mule.”⁷ While the amount of drugs transported was substantial, John insisted that he was working at the “lower level.” His job was to simply transport the drug. He had no role in the actual agreements, cash transactions, or any other further responsibilities.

The fact that he was unwilling to introduce ethnographers to some of the dealers whom he had known or for whom he had worked is significant. Although not currently employed by these individuals, John was reluctant to contact his former associates and superiors. Several possibilities existed for this reluctance. He may have acted out of fear of possible reprisals, or he may have experienced a continuing sense of responsibility towards these individuals. If the latter were indeed the case, then tightly-knit bonds and understandings would possibly contribute to the cohesiveness and persistence of these organizations through time.

John's perception of himself as a “lower level” employee was also significant for several reasons. First, if arrested in possession of large quantities, “mules” face very long prison terms—usually the maximum sentence for drug sales. Second, his “mule” role entailed a great deal of responsibility since he was accountable for large quantities of drugs and the money these drugs represented. John reported no organizational responsibilities (e.g., supervision of other employees or duty to account for the shipment's cash value) beyond the simple duty of delivering his shipments to some other intermediary. According to John, one criterion differentiating “lower” from “higher” level employees of this organization may be the presence or absence of these organizational responsibilities. Third, John had been sufficiently reliable and able to smuggle drugs past customs and borders to be very valuable to his employers. Fourth, by possessing and transporting one or several kilograms of drugs, John's responsibilities clearly placed him among the upper-level dealing groups. Another reason why John's perception of himself could be significant was that our criteria of what constitutes the “lower”

⁷That is, someone in charge of physically transporting drugs from one country to another.

and “higher” ranks of drug selling may differ significantly from that of those who perform various roles in drug distribution organizations.

John had also performed several other key dealing roles (e.g., “captain,” “lieutenant,” “crew boss,” etc.) and had moved through the ranks in a drug distribution organization but never entered the top levels where major “deals” were negotiated. A key expectation of everyone operating at this level was that no one “rats” or “identifies” anyone else in the organization, especially those at levels above them. Everyone was expected to “hide” or “conceal” identities of drug-dealing comrades from everyone else. This expectation also extended into the distant future and included concealing identities from virtually everyone, including ethnographers, so John could not introduce ethnographers to anyone in the organization because it would have violated this rule.

Conclusion

Acquiring cooperation from sellers and dealers will always be difficult because of the illegality of their activities and the seriousness of consequences associated with an arrest. Their whole culture is justifiably suspicious that no “straight” is to be trusted. Because of this, many persons will refuse to talk to ethnographers under any circumstances. In other cases, acquiring cooperation has to be readjusted to suit the geographical area of study. Although various adjustments may be necessary, at all times, a trusted go-between is needed. The primary emphasis should be placed upon locating the highest status go-betweens.

The strategies outlined above, therefore, may not work all the time with every crack seller or dealer. Factors such as race/ethnicity, the size of the organization, and the level of suspicion have to be taken into consideration. As evinced by the example of John, in some cases, access to some upper level distribution organizations is impossible. Some dealers are similar; they will not permit themselves to be interviewed, nor will they allow their operation to be studied. Such resistance to outsiders is understood in the framework of the subculture of drug distribution. Using the strategies described in this article, however, success in locating and interviewing many sellers and dealers is possible.

We contend that with a little readjustment, these strategies afford appropriate procedures for ethnographers to reach other hard-to-reach populations. We conjecture, however, that it will be easier to employ these strategies with populations not so stigmatized or as at-risk of serious legal punishments as the crack sellers and suppliers who are the subject of our investigation.

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