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Drug Sales, Gender, and Risk: Notions of Risk From the Perspective of Gang-Involved Young Adults

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Abstract

We examine gender and meanings of risk in interviews (2007–2010) with gang-involved young men and women ($n = 253$) engaged in illicit drug sales in San Francisco, California. The in-depth interviews from this NIDA-funded study were coded using the software NVivo to identify patterns and themes. We examine their interpretations of the risks of drug-selling and their narratives about gender differences in these risks. We find distinct discourses regarding the role of femininities and masculinities and male and female bodies in shaping risk as well as the nexus between gender, family, and risk for female drug sellers.

Keywords

risk; gender; drug sales; gangs; youth; risk-reduction strategies

INTRODUCTION

Popular and scholarly discussions of gangs and gang members are often deeply imbued with images of risk. Gang members are described as coming from “at-risk” families and neighborhoods, and as conducting a range of “high-risk” activities. These notions of risk vacillate between identifying a multitude of risk factors that place young people in danger of becoming gang members to focusing on gang members as a threat that puts the rest of their community at risk. They are thus presented as both *subjects-at-risk* and *subjects-of-risk* (Lupton, 1999; Van Loon, 2008). Rarely does this research, though, examine the meanings and constructions of risk from the perspective of young gang members themselves. What “risks” do they find salient in their lives and what steps do they take to mitigate them? This paper examines constructions of risk in the narratives of a group of gang-involved young men and women who sell illicit drugs in the San Francisco area and their discussions of the gendered dimensions of these risks. We are concerned not with establishing absolute or

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objective levels of risk experienced by male and female drug sellers, rather we seek to examine the *meaning* of risk in the lived experiences of these young men and women.

Studying Risk

Risk has become a major preoccupation in everyday life, and in academia. In the case of the latter, the technico-scientific, “realist” approach dominates many disciplines, including medicine, epidemiology, and psychology, which share a focus on the identification of risk factors, their causes, and ways to limit risk (Lupton, 1999). There is, however, growing awareness in the social sciences of the need to contextualize and problematize risk, with three distinct theoretical strands focusing on risk as a social-cultural phenomenon (Hannah-Moffat & O’Malley, 2007; Lupton, 1999).

The first examines the centrality of risk and risk awareness in “late modern society” (Beck, 1992, 1994; Giddens, 1990). In this “reflexive” modernity, one’s exposure to risk largely defines one’s social group positions, as new social risks transcend traditional organizing principals such as class and nationality. The pervasiveness of voluntary risk-taking or edgework, particularly among youth, is understood as an attempt to achieve control within an ontologically insecure social world (Hayward, 2002; Lyng, 1990; 2005; Lyng & Mathews, 2007; O’Malley & Mugford, 1993).

The second strand of research is associated with governmentality, where constructions of risk are understood as techniques for conceptualizing and managing problems and societies. This perspective does not look at risk as given objectively (Ewald, 1991). Rather, it looks at the creation of risk as a tool for governance, through the growing use of actuarial tables, probabilistic thinking, and calculations of risk in management and government. The use of risk for governance can be seen in the growing dominance of risk factor analysis in understanding youth who are the target of “adult anxieties” (France, 2008). Underlying risk factor analysis is the belief in individualism, in appropriate development through a normative lifecycle, and psychological approaches to social life. The growing prominence of risk is accompanied by a neoliberal emphasis on increasing individualization, with increased individual responsibilities to manage one’s own risks (O’Malley, 2004; Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006). This self-management of risk becomes key to citizenship (Petersen & Wilkinson, 2008).

The third approach to risk examines subjective experiences of and interpretations of risk, and how these shape everyday life. This is the theoretical approach that the present paper works within. This cultural approach to risk views constructions of risk as varying greatly over time and between cultural formations (Douglas, 1985; Douglas & Widavsky, 1982). Here scholars seek to understand how individuals perceive risk as active agents, rather than as passive recipients of risk probabilities. Risk perception is not experienced by isolated individuals but as embedded in cultural, organizational, and institutional contexts (Rayner, 1992). This perspective emphasizes the importance of looking at individual rationalities as well as the “distribution and influence of *power* in negotiated actions and the *habituated* nature of risk behavior ... to understand the interplay of social factors which give rise to individuals’ situated risk perceptions and actions” (Rhodes, 1997, p. 208; emphasis in the original).

Following on from this third tradition, we are interested in why some practices are recognized as risks, and others are not. Which risks are seen as being more significant than others? What constraints operate in attempting to manage risks? How are risks negotiated within social interactions (Hannah-Moffat & O'Malley, 2007)? Sanders (2004) begins to address these questions, having found a continuum of risks as experienced and interpreted by female sex workers. Although these women had concerns about the health and safety risks emphasized by public health researchers and workers, they generally felt their protective strategies were sound. However, these women described many emotional risks, including the risks of their work being discovered by or disclosed to friends or family and the risks that participation in commercial sex work would undermine or sully the experience of intimacy in their personal lives. Yet these sorts of emotional risks are rarely considered or even acknowledged in the public health sector's calculus of these women as at-risk or as vectors of risk.

Sanders's (2004) work points to the salience of gender in shaping risk perceptions, experiences, and behaviors. Whereas the risk theory has implicitly assumed abstract gender-neutral, or implicitly male, subjects, feminist researchers argue for looking at risk through a gender lens, highlighting ways in which gender and risk are mutually constitutive (Chan & Rigakos, 2002; Hannah-Moffat & O'Malley, 2007; Lupton, 1999; Miller, 1991). Men and women confront different risks in their lives, although many everyday risks that women negotiate have not always been visible in traditional, masculinist formulations of risk and risk society (Chan & Rigakos, 2002). It is thus important to examine risk from the perspective and experiences of embodied and gendered subjects to understand how they evaluate, interpret, embrace, and seek to mitigate risks in their lives.

Gangs, Drug Sales, and Risk

The "risk environment" of drug markets comprises not only individual actor's decisions and their outcomes but also a whole host of contextual and social structural factors, including legal and punitive frameworks, social networks, socioeconomic inequalities, and community norms (Fitzgerald, 2009; Rhodes, 2005, 2009). In the criminological scholarship on drug-selling, the examination of risk often centers on criminal justice and economic risks, and the risk-management strategies that dealers, primarily male, adopt to decrease police detection, imprisonment, and loss of profit (Caulkins & Reuter, 1998; Johnson & Natarajan, 1995). The risks of street-level drug dealing are remarkably similar to legitimate businesses, including competition in the marketplace, problematic transactions (e.g., being duped or cheated), liability (e.g., third parties, informants, disgruntled customers), and law enforcement (Coomber and Maher, 2006; Cross, 2000). However, the intensity of these risks is heightened for drug dealing given its illicit nature (Dunlap, Johnson, & Manwar, 1994; Jacobs & Miller, 1998; Johnson, Hamid, & Sanabria, 1992). Street sellers adopt a number of strategies to lessen the risks of police intervention, including increasing mobility before and after transactions, using lookouts, and reducing the visibility of transactions (Jacobs, 1996; Johnson & Natarajan, 1995; Worden, Bynum, & Frank, 1994). Strategies are also developed for minimizing risks associated with conducting transactions, for example, cultivating a "tough reputation" (Cross, 2000). Finally, some drug dealers' experience of risk may be

shaped by their own experiences as drug users as well (Small et al., 2013), while other dealers develop rules against using drugs themselves (Jacobs, 1999; Waldorf, 1993).

While these drug-selling risks operate both for male and female sellers, some risks faced by women are distinct because of the patriarchal nature of the street. For example, women may face different risks of physical violence, and women are more likely to be victims of violence from clients and rival males than their male drug-selling counterparts (Hutton, 2005; Maher, 1997; Maher & Hudson, 2007; Miller & Neaigus, 2002; Murphy & Arroyo, 2000; Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 2000). Female drug sellers, many of whom have family obligations, may develop gendered risk avoidance strategies, especially for the risk of arrest, such as altering their clothing style to avoid attracting attention or using gendered props to conceal their drug-selling (Jacobs & Miller, 1998).

Although early drug sales research was male-dominated (both in terms of researchers and research subjects), a number of important studies on women drug sellers and their participation in drug markets have been produced over the past three decades. Several debates have emerged about women's relative levels of empowerment in drug markets versus their continuing exploitation, victimization, or powerlessness, the changing roles of women in the drug economies, from heroin markets to growing opportunities in crack cocaine era, to diversified roles in contemporary drug markets (Anderson, 2005; Fagan, 1994; Maher, 1997; Maher & Hudson, 2007; Miller, 2001; Morgan & Joe, 1997). Although women have had an increasing role in the drug economy (Anderson, 2005; Anderson, 2008; Griffin & Rodriguez, 2011; Hutton, 2005), women's participation largely remains in the lower level roles, and drug markets continue to be highly gender-stratified (Maher & Hudson, 2007).

The gang is a significant context for street-level drug sales (Bjerregaard, 2010) and research has long documented drug selling among female gang members in the United States. In the 1980s in Los Angeles, some Mexican American female "auxiliary or associated" members used and sold heroin but typically at a subordinate level; few dealt on their own (Moore & Mata, 1981). Drug offenses were the most common arrest among female gang members in Los Angeles and Chicago during the 1990s (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001). In Milwaukee, although African-American and Latina female members participated in cocaine sales, their involvement was proportionately less than their male counterparts (Moore & Hagedorn, 1999). In Columbus, Ohio and St. Louis, Missouri, young women in mixed-gender gangs attempted to carve out "meaningful niches for themselves" (Miller, 2001; Miller & Brunson, 2000, p. 420; Miller & Decker, 2001) while men continued to dominate the "structure, status hierarchies, and activities" (Miller & Brunson, 2000, p. 420; see also Miller 2001; Miller & Decker 2001). Invariably, women had to turn to the men for drug supplies and protection. This dependency on men has been observed by others, who have argued that while women's roles may have expanded, gender exploitation in mixed gender gangs remains (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001, Moore & Hagedorn, 1999).

Although female gang members are most often involved in mixed-gender gangs, women in female-only gangs have set up their own drug-selling operations and act as independent units (Lauderback, Hansen, & Waldorf, 1992). While this strategy does not protect them

from *all* forms of male control, it does afford women greater freedom, independence, and earnings. However, the extent to which women in independent gangs are involved in drug-selling is somewhat contested. Miller and Brunson (2000) found that women in female-only gangs are less likely than those in mixed-gender gangs to be involved in crime, including drug-selling.

Against this backdrop, we are interested in both conceptualizations and experiences of risk in the narratives of men and women who are illicit drug sellers. We focus specifically on how risk is understood, evaluated, and acted upon by gang-involved drug sellers in San Francisco, and the gendered dimensions of this. In so doing, we highlight the subjectivity and agency of these gang-involved youth; a dimension often missing from the popular image of them as vectors of risk.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

For this study of gender and drug sales, we interviewed 253 young men and women, 2007–2010, who self-identified as gang members and reported selling drugs. Although the study primarily focused on examining the role of women as drug sellers, we interviewed men as well, to gain their perspective on the gender organization of gangs and how they understood female drug sellers. The analysis for this paper draws particularly from a sub-sample of 50 respondents, selected randomly from the larger sample to allow us to perform close readings of the interview transcripts and their coding. All names used to refer to respondents in this paper are pseudonyms.

Respondents were recruited via project staff's contacts (including community agencies, residents, and gang members), and through chain-referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005). Fieldworkers conducted in-depth interviews based on a pre-coded quantitative portion and open-ended qualitative questions about their family life, gang involvement, and drug sales history. These fieldworkers had familiarity with the gang scene, having previously had gang ties, or having been a community worker. Their familiarity and knowledge with street life helped develop rapport with respondents and served as reliability and validity checks. Interviews took two to three hours and were conducted at various locations, including residences, youth centers, cafes, and libraries. Respondents received an honorarium of \$75 for their participation and another \$25 if they were able to recruit up to two additional respondents.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative coding of the interviews was conducted using the software NVivo. The interviews included some questions explicitly about risk—what they saw as the greatest risks they faced in selling drugs, what steps, if any, they took to avoid these risks as well as what they saw as the positive and negative effects of their drug-selling career upon their lives. The responses analyzed in the current paper though were not restricted to their responses to these particular questions however, but rather many of their discourses emerged throughout various points in the interview. In attempting to conduct a cultural analysis of risk perceptions and discourses among drug sellers, we sought to identify what these young people identified as the key risks, how they interpreted these risks, strategies they discussed to avoid risks, and how they

understood the gendered dimensions of risk. This entailed both looking for gendered patterns of risk discussions and looking for the ways that gendered discourses shaped their narratives about risk.

The Sample: Background and Gang Descriptions

We interviewed 133 women and 120 men for this project, between 2007 and 2010. African-Americans comprised the largest ethnic group in the sample (53%, $n = 134$), followed by Latinos (primarily Chicano/Mexicano but also including Central American; 26%, $n = 65$), Asian-Americans or Pacific Islanders (API) (11%, $n = 28$) as well as 18 who identified primarily as “mixed,”—four whites, and one Native American. It is certainly the case that racial/ethnic stratification, profiling as well as community issues have an important influence on experiences with and interpretations of the risks of drug-selling. In addition, these factors do not simply operate independently, but rather are intertwined with and intersect with the gendered dimensions of risk. However, the racialized aspects of drug-selling risks (and their intersections with gendered risks) will not be a primary analytical focus in the current paper but are an important area for future inquiry.

The respondents’ age ranged from 14 to 39 years but most were in their late teens and early twenties, with a mean age of 21.7 years. Most respondents had uneven educational histories: 80% of the respondents reported that they had at one point dropped out or been kicked out of school, and 70% of these eventually returned to a different school, 9% eventually received a GED, and 18% never returned to school; 47% of the respondents reported less than 12 years of education (although some of these respondents were underage and were still engaged in schooling); 51% of the sample had completed high school, and 1.6% of the sample had some amount of post-secondary education.

The difficulties they encountered in school, and absence of a credential, hindered employment abilities and resulted in hustles (drug sales). Only 24% of the respondents reported being currently employed in legal occupations; 57% of the sample reported that drug sales was their number one source of income in the past month, followed by legal employment (14%), government support (8%), and family (6%). Most respondents grew up in impoverished neighborhoods and unstable households—with their parents’ struggles to maintain employment, difficulties with substance abuse, and violence in the family.

The respondents’ gangs varied in terms of size, duration, and organization. These ranged from small neighborhood, school, or block cliques, with 10 or so members, to long-lasting gangs with 200 members. Most groups were loosely defined with no clear hierarchy. Gangs were typically ethnically homogenous. The gendered organization of the gangs also varied, with 12% of the respondents we interviewed in all-female gangs, 18% in all-male gangs (although about a third of those said that girls had a significant presence), 43% said their gangs were mixed gender with “equal status,” and 24% said that there were separate male and female subgroups in their gang.

Although a range of substances were sold, the most common were marijuana (sold by 86% of the respondents in their lifetimes) and crack cocaine (sold by 72%). Many conducted drug sales as individuals but use the gang for connections. Being in the gang provides access to

supplies, knowledge of the streets and area, and drug connections. But there is a great deal of variability regarding whether drug sales are seen as truly a part of the gang, or whether it's seen as a side activity that gang members participate in, but not as a central aspect of their group identity. As youth, they were introduced to drug sales via a number of routes: some by family members and, in the case of young women, often by boyfriends. For many, the gang was the initial context of their sales.

Drug Selling, Risks, and Risk-Reduction Strategies

—Go to jail. Getting robbed. And even losing your life. (Gabby, Latina, aged 33 years)

Gabby sums up gang members' commonly perceived risks of selling drugs. A few respondents thought that there wasn't much they could do to avoid arrest or other drug sales risks. "If it's your day to get caught, it's just your day" (Renee, Latina, aged 21 years). But many made reference to a number of tactics to reduce risks—making careful decisions about what to sell, where to sell, and whom to sell to. The risks associated with drug sales are not simply passively accepted but are actively navigated. Still, most acknowledge that they face a great deal of, often unavoidable, risks. Many had histories of multiple arrests, jail time, or have experienced being robbed, beat up, or other forms of violence in the course of their work as drug sellers.

Risk-reduction strategies ranged widely. Some of the study's participants chose to control closely whom they sold to, preferring to sell to trusted customers. The type of drugs to sell can be a key decision, affecting potential risks and potential rewards—with marijuana perceived as being the least risky to sell but as reaping less rewards and entailing greater competition with other sellers. Other drugs are seen as being riskier to sell—due to greater chances of being caught, greater potential sentences, and also the uncertainties and difficulties associated with selling to "junkies," "dope fiends," "crack heads," or "meth heads." "Dope fiends" were a common complaint, deemed as unpredictable risks.

The choice of neighborhood or location to sell also affects perceived risks. One major drug market in San Francisco was said to bring many opportunities to sell, as it brought buyers from all over the city, and no one group could claim territorial control. Yet many avoided this area entirely due to the risks with too many undercover police officers present. Selling in one's own neighborhood was generally seen as less risky. Lexis (Samoan, aged 29 years) called it her "safety zone." Camille (African-American, aged 26 years) similarly asserted that selling in her neighborhood, where there is a sense of familiarity and predictability, is safe: "I feel no risk at all. There might be like one or two with, you know decoys, but I know how to avoid them. So, I don't feel risky at all once I'm up in my neighborhood." But, for many, the allure of plentiful buyers and quick sales in the bigger market outweigh the risks for them, at least some of the time.

Street selling, regardless of location, brings great risk of arrest and violence. Street sellers work in the open, often carry drugs on them, and face more opportunities for arrest and possible violence compared with other, more sheltered options. For some, an acceptable alternative is selling from their home. This reduces the feeling of being vulnerable on the

street. “You feel safer in your house ... I felt like I knew I wasn’t going to jail as long as I was selling at my house, and I was taking a chance when I go out on the streets” (Lisa, African-American, aged 39 years). Selling from home introduces its own risks, however: making one’s very home and family vulnerable to robbery or police intervention. Hong (Vietnamese aged 17 years) said that she no longer sells from home because “I don’t wanna put my house at risk. I don’t want put like my family at risk.” As we describe below, family- and home-related risks are particularly gendered, commonly expressed in women’s narratives, but typically absent among young men.

Selling Alone or Selling in Groups—Many of these risks are common across the men and women—choice of drugs to sell, whom to sell to, where to sell were the issues that all drug sellers had to consider or face. Yet, there is a gendered dimension to these risks and decisions, related to the different positions and power available to young men and women in street drug markets. One example of this is the issue of with whom to sell drugs. For some women, selling drugs in groups offers protection. Elisha (African-American, aged 29 years) stressed the importance of working together: “Go in groups is always. Cuz you always have someone looking out ... that takes the pressure off you as far as looking out for each other, you got to always be doing that.” Some young women said that selling with a group is safer because it provides them with protection as well as friendship and a sense of family connectedness. Working in a clique provides other advantages, including better earnings from connecting to a larger customer base and more drug suppliers. In some cases this was selling in all-female cliques, especially among African-American respondents. Other men and women noted the importance for female sellers to have male protection so that they would not be easy targets for being ripped off or robbed.

Many of the young men also sold in groups—either as a team with a couple of friends, or more hierarchically with some lower-level members (male or female) serving as look-outs or holding the product for them. However, this was less often discussed by the young men as a risk-avoidance strategy. And when risk did enter their discussions about selling in numbers, the risks discussed were primarily the risks of police detection—whereas for the young women the risks often included the risk of being jumped, assaulted, or robbed. In this case, then, it is more the motivation for the practice that is gendered, than the practice (selling in groups) itself.

There was far from consensus on the perceived benefits of selling with others, however. Selling with others, and especially *for* others, carried its own risks, and some of these risks are highly gendered. Some women note the risks that selling with or for men can bring, and advocate selling on their own independently or with other women. Ashley (African-American, aged 23 years) wanted to sell on her own not only because it meant greater profits and greater autonomy but because she also thought that it was safer:

Selling it for somebody else is more risky than selling for yourself ... Cuz if the person you’re selling for gets mad at you, then you don’t get none o’ your money. And then like if you’re selling for yourself, then, you know you’re getting everything.

She is, though, aware of the disadvantages of selling on your own, “selling for somebody else is you know for sure somebody got your back. More than by yourself ... Cuz they want try to save you, cuz, cuz you got their stuff.” Jackie (African-American, aged 21 years) also talked about the benefits and drawbacks of selling alone compared to selling with a group:

Selling alone, I get all the money to myself ... But consequences come with that cuz, sometimes the dope fiend take my stuff. Like, you know, run off with it ... That’s why I need them [male sellers] around sometimes.

Young women who sold on their own often discussed in negative terms other female drug sellers who were less independent, sometimes dismissing them as “bops.” Mia (African-American, aged 23 years) discussed patterns of drug sales in one major market in the city, saying that in that area “it’s mostly men that’s got females running for them, or either prostituting for them.” In that location, men are the main dealers, with women working at the lower level. Mia views these women as akin to the prostitutes that the men “run” on the street. She said it’s risky for women to sell alone in that area because the assumption is you need a man for protection and everyone will ask “who are you up under? Who you selling dope for?” There are no advantages in selling there because it’s impossible to have any respect as a women selling for men, and because women in the area, usually white women, are viewed dismissively. As Mia states: “They call white girls down there snow bunnies. Because she’s a prostitute, and when they’re not prostituting, she’s on the block holding his sack. And then she was like this, behind him.”

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DRUG SALES RISKS

Some young men and women believe that the risks of drug-selling were the same irrespective of gender. Naomi (African-American, aged 22 years) says: “Anybody can get caught ... ain’ no difference ... everybody go to jail.” But for most of the respondents, gender was perceived as providing certain advantages, disadvantages, and distinct risks. While men are described as being more vulnerable to the risk of arrest, women are presumed to be at greater risk of street victimization.

Men’s Vulnerability to Arrest

Flashy Men and Smart Women—According to male gang members, women face less risk of arrest because police are less likely to suspect or search them. “The police will less expect a female to be selling ... Let’s say if I was on the corner, and a girl was on the corner, they expect me to be selling drugs before she was” (Brandon, African-American aged 22 years). Some men believe that if arrested, women are likely to get more lenient sentences based on the assumption that it was at a man’s behest, so she would not be punished severely, “they’ll think the male try to force her, force the lady to selling it... they ain’ gon’ do nothing to [her]” (Jeremiah, African-American, aged 16 years).

Many young women agreed that women are less likely to be monitored by the police. However, they did not attribute this solely to police officers’ naïve assumptions about female drug sellers, but rather to the young men’s behavior. Being too flashy with “all kinda big-ass, chains, gold teeth, Rolexes, big this and they got no kinda job, nothing” is a sure way to attract undue attention,” said Candy (African-American/Samoan, aged 19 years).

Many criticized the “flashiness” of many male drug sellers who make themselves obvious: “The girls are more discreet. The dudes ... showboating. They wanna be outside and be seen. Their cars gotta be seen ... Damn fools” (Val, African-American, aged 29 years). In essence, male sellers make themselves vulnerable to arrest through their clothes, deportment, and obvious display of wealth, which they presumably could not have come by legally.

Both male and female sellers make the distinction between sellers who are smart and savvy versus those who are less savvy, too flashy, too easily duped, and too lazy. Not surprisingly, most respondents placed themselves in the savvy category. Jason (Chinese, aged 22 years) said that the risks of drug sales:

... depends on how smart you are. Of course, you don’t wanna make a drug sale like in front of a donut shop full of cops. It’s like, you gotta know where to go or ... like where it’s safe. [Those caught are]...doing something stupid, like, just being at the wrong place at the wrong time, like selling at a intersection where it’s like a lotta cars.

A smart dealer knows how to avoid the wrong place. Smart sellers have to be savvy enough to detect undercover police or “narcs,” industrious enough not to sell in the obvious places, not to carry drugs on oneself or in one’s car when they’re likely to be searched, not to take unnecessary risks out of laziness, or a desire for a quick buck.

While both men and women make this distinction between smart sellers like themselves and those who are more likely to be duped or caught, it was primarily the young women who framed this distinction around gender. The trope of the too flashy male seller recurred repeatedly, especially among young women. This was generally a gendered description—they didn’t describe an abstract flashy seller, but specifically a flashy *man* selling. The greater chance of men being arrested isn’t inherent in their maleness but rather the result of their self-presentations, particularly “masculine” behaviors. Whereas the men might connect their flashiness and bravado to the need to establish a reputation on the street and hence an asset (Anderson, 2005; Bourgois, 1995), the women typically saw this as a liability.

Women avoid detection through discretion, according to many female sellers. These women explicitly connect feminine styles of dress to this ability to blend in and avoid detection, “Even though I hustle, I’m still a lady... I can still be a girly girl and be a hustler. I put time into how I look then I don’t seem so obvious on the street. That’s why I don’t ever get caught. Because I don’t have no big-ass, baggy-ass hoodie on” (Deondra, African-American, aged 23 years). However, this approach was not universal, and other young women selling drugs preferred a more asexual or tom-boyish look, wearing baggy clothes and avoiding overly revealing or conventionally feminine looks. These young women emphasized the need to project a tough look and equally tough attitude as a means to avoid victimization from clients or other sellers and gangs. They described the need to wear sturdy clothes that have the flexibility and strength to allow freedom of movement if they get into a fight or need to suddenly take off and run.

Snitches—Related to the risk of getting caught by the police was the risk of being snitched on—of people pointing the police toward them so that they themselves could avoid arrest. Some had a somewhat fatalistic view about snitches, seeing it as a perennial danger, difficult to avoid. Some take precautions to avoid being ratted on. Asensio's (Latino, aged 21 years) precaution is to avoid working with women because "I don't really trust females because ... some might be tough out there but I don't really see them doing time. When they get caught and they are selling for me ... you never know they might tell on me. To me, in a way, they are the weakest." Some women concur that other woman sellers are a threat, particularly when considering that potential snitches may have less fear of retribution if they snitch on a woman.

A Changing Landscape?—These relative risks can change over time, and paradoxically be related to the unintended consequences of the prevailing risks. Many reported that because of the perception that men are more vulnerable to arrest, the very makeup of drug-selling was changing, with women taking a more prominent, visible role in street sales:

The males don't even be out there [on the street]. They don't put males out there no more. I mean like they don't, the males don't put their self out there, they put females out there. They rather for [the women] to get caught than their self ... they don't care. (Yolanda, African-American, aged 28 years)

Over time, she suspected, the transition to female sellers will also mean that women would be no longer be insulated from police surveillance, with women more likely to be on the police radar, "when the time comes." Cheryl (African-American, aged 23 years) thinks that time has already come: "I think like the girls are being looked at a lot more than they were before." She said that now the men are carrying the money, whereas the women are stuffing and holding the drugs, and that the latter poses greater risks. "I mean they could say like, 'shit, this is my money.' Like it's harder to prove where the money came from versus, 'why do you have like all this dope on you?' 'You know?'" By being increasingly asked to hold drugs on the street, women may be increasingly at risk.

Women Bodies as More Vulnerable—to Violence, Victimization

The threat of violence is an obvious potential risk for female drug sellers, and other research has found that women are more likely to be the victims of violence from both clients and rival males than their male drug-selling counterparts (Maher, 1997; Miller & Neaigus, 2002; Murphy & Arroyo, 2000; Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 2000). Women also face greater risks, compared with men, of sexual harassment or assault.

Women's bodies were seen to make them more vulnerable to robbery and physical violence. Zara (Latina, aged 16 years) said that men are more able to protect themselves, given their physical size: "Guys probably can protect themselves more than girls can. Like cuz girls get snatched up (laughs) and stuff, and like, you know, guys are more bulky, can't get snatched up that fast." Or as Baby (African-American, aged 17 years) said: "Dudes probably be twice as fast to jack a girl than they would a dude ... Cuz they're like, 'All right, it's a girl, we could come up on her.'"

Elisha (African-American, aged 29 years) provides a mixed report about the “equality” among male and female drug sellers. She described a story in which a young woman was selling drugs, apparently in someone else’s territory, when she was ambushed by a rival (male) seller, who broke her jaw: “They’re equals, and in some ways they’re not equals. Now, he came right up, ran up on her, and hit her, and beat her up like she was a man.” Equality, she said, meant that she was just as likely to get beat up as a man would, yet women are at a greater disadvantage “cuz they know they can beat her up faster than a man.” Whereas men have the ability to operate as drug sellers alone, women need to have the protection of other women or men to reduce the risk of robbery.

Still male and female dealers recognize that men may be equally if not more prone to violent victimization because of their propensity for fights, aggression, and use of weapons. Shannon (African-American, aged 29 years) said that it’s more dangerous for men to sell “cuz they always beefing with somebody, so they can’t be on the block for that long. Somebody always gon’ shoot at ‘em or something. Women don’t get shot at, only men.” Jeremiah (African-American, aged 16 years) made a similar observation. When asked if women could get the same respect in the gang as the men, he responded: “Nah ... yeah, they could, but they don’t, they wouldn’t, they just fight, like, all they do is fight. Like they don’t shoot, so... they don’t shoot.” Although girls and women in the gang do engage in fights and violence, it rarely involves guns or shooting. Whereas Shannon focused on this in terms of the danger that men face on the streets, Jeremiah connects this to men’s greater status and respect in the gang, arguing that because women are less involved with gun culture, they will remain in a more marginalized position in the gang. Thus, the risks of gun violence are also weighed in terms of the gains of status and respect.

Women’s Bodies as a Resource: Stuffing

Although women’s bodies were presented as their biggest source of vulnerability and risk, in some narratives women’s bodies were presented as a resource for drug selling. Specifically, women’s bodies were said to be an advantage in drug selling because women “got more hiding spots” (Dominic, African-American, aged 22 years), “women have more hiding places ... men don’t have, nowhere to stuff that shit” (Faith, African-American, aged 25 years). Mia (African-American, aged 23 years) said that in some areas of the city women were more likely to “hold” drugs for sales because of their ability to “stuff”—to store drugs in their vaginas while selling on the street:

It’s more men that got females working for them, because men obviously can’t hold too much dope on them. Females, we hold a lot, cuz we could stuff it in our mouth. I mean men could put it in their mouth, too, but we stuff the sacks in our vagina. So, where police can’t find it... if you have two or three girls out there selling your dope, that mean you got two or three sacks, two or three different bundles.

Lucha (Latina, aged 27 years) said she kept her drugs close when she was selling: “They were either in my mouth or my pussy. Sorry to talk like that but it’s the truth.” Jackie (African-American, aged 21 years) said that this has saved her more than once—she has been pulled over or approached by police officers, but since her drugs were “stuffed” she

was safe: “You can’t go up in me. He was a man. You can’t touch me.” Another young woman said that this wasn’t foolproof—savvy police officers would call for a female police backup to do a search—but “sometimes that give us enough time to put our stuff where it needs to be.” So, in these narratives, women’s bodies, which are in other instances thought of as a liability for sales (due to smaller stature and body strength), are in this case perceived as a distinct risk-reduction advantage.

GENDER, FAMILY, AND RISK

One final set of risks likely to affect women more than men are related to family—risks of disclosure and risks of loss of family. Although these are risks that potentially could affect both men and women, they almost never emerged in male narratives but were common with women.

The potential risk of disclosure, of one’s involvement in drug sales being revealed to one’s family, led many to hide their drug sales and gang involvement from their parents and other adults in their extended family households. Renee (Latina, aged 21 years) worried about this risk: “I hide it from my family (laughs) ... it’s very risky. They catch me and I’m [booted] outta here.” Ashley (African-American, aged 23 years) said that her family members disapproved of her drug sales and tried to physically prevent it: “They don’t want me to sell, so they’ll take my bundles and put ‘em in the toilet.”

Whereas Renee and Ashley describe the risk in terms of the material consequences—getting kicked out of the house, losing one’s stash—others were more worried about the emotional risks of disappointing one’s family. Mia (African-American, aged 23 years) said that she worked hard to avoid letting her family know of her drug sales: “I didn’t want them to know what I was doing, cuz they would look down on me ... most of them worked, or they went to school, or they had really good jobs ... I was ashamed of it ... they would kept their distance, they wouldn’t have treated me equally as them.” She said her half-sisters didn’t have this same problem, though, because on their side of the family most people were themselves “on drugs and selling drugs. So, it was no different for them.” Candy (African-American/Samoan, aged 19 years) felt bad when her mother discovered that she was selling crack because her mother had had her own involvement with the drug and had wished for Candy to avoid that “cuz she know how, like what she went through. Like, all the times she got arrested ... she just didn’t want me to sell crack. Just the experience that she had.”

Not all women worried about their families’ knowledge of their drug sales. For some young women, their family members (siblings, aunts, and cousins) had introduced them to drug sales. Still some tried to shield the knowledge from their mothers or grandmothers.

Of greater concern for those sellers who themselves were young mothers, was the possibility that their own children would discover that they sell drugs. Camille (African-American, aged 26 years) said that she would be “heartbroken” if her daughter realized she sold drugs and that she “would immediately stop. Immediately. Literally.” She did stop when she was pregnant, but then resumed drug sales after because “newborn baby, a lotta diapers, lotta money needed. A lot.”

Still, not everyone wanted to shield their children from this knowledge. Ebony (African-American, aged 35 years) talks to her children about everything, including her past involvement in drug sales:

I know they're children, so they gon' have to experience some stuff for themselves ... but I try to tell them what I went through, so they don't have to go down the same road.

While worries about children discovering their drug sales weighed on some mothers (especially those whose children were getting older), an even bigger risk was the possibility of losing one's children in the case of an arrest. Gabby (Latina, aged 33 years) said that selling drugs is riskier for women because of their roles as mothers: "I think we're taking a big risk, and it's ... I think we lose more [compared to men]. Just because some of us have kids." Carrie (African-American, aged 30 years) said that overall men and women face the same risks from drug selling: "I think the repercussions are all the same," but she said that it is riskier for women "if they have kids ... she might be a single mother, and her kids could go to CPS [Child Protective Services] and a man doesn't have shit to worry about."

While drug sales was a risk for one's family, it could help mitigate other dangers, such as not having resources to support a family. Candy (African-American/Samoan, aged 19 years) describes supporting her children as a major impetus and rationale for drug sales:

I got two kids. If ain't nobody trying to hire me, and if I can't bring in no money for my kids, and then I think it's cool [acceptable] to sell drugs. Cuz, how else will people get their money? Like I don't wanna be on welfare. And, like if my baby daddy was, if me and him was to break up, like what the hell am I supposed to be? ... That's fast money, your kids might need diapers.

While drug-selling has risks, Candy finds, as a responsible mother, this is preferable to the alternatives of being on welfare or dependent on the income of the children's father. Tia (African-American, aged 23 years) similarly justifies her drug sales, which she said her family disapproves of:

They would just see that part, they wouldn't see me as a person ... 'Why is she hustling? ... Why is she going about it this way? Why is she not getting a job?' ... Cuz, it's fast money, I need it now. Like I don't have time to sit here and wait around here for a job to come through while my family hungry. So I'm gon' go get it the best way I know how to get it that fast ... I don't have no problem working ... it's just the fact that it's just not enough and it's not fast enough.

Candy and Tia recognize that while others may see them in a deviant light, they view their actions as consistent with being responsible mothers, who are doing what they need to do for their families. Here they are emphasizing not the risks of drug sales but rather the risks of *not* selling drugs.

Finally, some women described other risks to their family from drug-selling, in particular, facilitating family members' use. Faith said that she purposefully avoided selling drugs in her own community because she didn't want to sell to members of her family, and "serving my auntie, even though she do what she do, I didn't wanna be the one giving it to her." Nia

(African-American/White, aged 20 years) had a similar rule, because on one occasion, she sold to her mother, and “that made me hurt so bad inside.” These young women did not want to be responsible for the problems that they attributed to their family’s use of drugs.

The gendered dynamics of drug-selling risks thus are not simply connected to who has a greater chance of getting caught or facing violence, but also the gendered nature of these consequences. For the women getting caught does not solely equate with loss of one’s freedom but also potentially the loss of one’s family, a risk that was far less salient for most of the men. Perhaps the absence of men’s discussions about children is related to the fact that although many have had children, few live with or have custody of them.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although our sample cannot be considered a representative in the way that a random sample would be, a true probability sample would not be feasible for this study population. Because of the “hidden” nature of our target population, standard probability sampling methods are ineffective for accessing participants. Instead, qualitative methods and targeted sampling strategies are best suited to recruit this group.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides a socio-cultural analysis of risk perceptions and meanings by exploring discussions of risk among urban San Francisco gang-involved men and women who sell illicit drugs. Most said that selling drugs entails a number of risks, with arrest, robbery, and assault being the most common ones. These drug sellers identified strategies to reduce these risks—selling alone or with others, selling off of the streets, or being savvy when on the street, using one’s body as an asset for hiding drugs.

In these narratives they often presented themselves as responsible, not taking unnecessary risks, and working effectively to mitigate risks, which they contrasted with other drug sellers, who were too flashy, naïve, or lazy, and who were more likely to experience negative consequences. These young men and women described themselves as making smart decisions as responsible drug sellers, able to control or at least greatly reduce the chance of getting caught. These narratives thus insulate them from the charge that they are taking needless or unnecessary risks and give a sense of control over their lives and their fates. In these discussions we see echoes of neoliberal discourses of risk in the risk society, in which individuals are given increasing responsibilities to monitor, assess, and take care to reduce the risks that they face in their lives. As scholars studying risk suggest, risk is far from a neutral term, and carries with it moral connotations (Douglas, 1992; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). This appears to be true in the drug-selling and gang arena as it is in other sectors of life.

Many described men and women having different positions on the street, with women increasingly carrying or “holding” drugs and increasing their presence as street-level sellers. Respondents disagreed, however, about the relative risks faced by men and women. In part, the degree of risk assigned to men or women depended on which risks were deemed more salient—risks of arrest or risks of victimization. Women were seen as being more vulnerable

to the risks of physical victimization whereas men were said to be more vulnerable to arrest. Women were much more likely to discuss risks that involve familial roles—the risk of one’s illicit work being revealed to parents or children, the risk of losing one’s children, but also the risk of not being able to provide for one’s children. What becomes clear are the gender differences in terms of how risk is understood, what risks are seen as being most salient, and how to mitigate the risks around them. Gender and risk are deeply intertwined in these discourses (Chan & Rigakos, 2002; Hannah-Moffat & O’Malley, 2007; Miller, 1991).

Feminist criminology has underscored the ways in which crime is drawn upon in the accomplishment of femininity and masculinity (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Messerschmidt, 1997). It is also crucial to turn this question around to examine the ways in which gender may be drawn upon as a resource to accomplish crime (Denton & O’Malley, 1999; Miller & Decker, 2001; Morgan & Joe, 1997). This analysis points to the ways in which gender and gendered presentations are drawn on in the accomplishment of crime. Female sellers describe avoiding police attention by eschewing the flashy bravado they associate with the masculine street seller persona and instead draw on emphasized femininity. At the same time, the young men’s flashiness and posturing on the streets is a form of street capital providing respect and power (Sandberg, 2008).

The female body is featured in these risk narratives in paradoxical ways—as increasing vulnerability to victimization as well as providing increased opportunities to conceal drugs. Although the physical strength of men’s bodies was noted, men’s advantages and vulnerabilities were more often discussed in terms of masculine behaviors—flashy self-presentation and aggressiveness.

We have focused on the subjective understandings of risk from the perspective of young urban San Francisco men and women involved in gangs and drug sales as a form of cultural analysis of risk perceptions, beliefs, and discourses (Douglas, 1985)—examining constructions of risk in one particular culture and moment. This work highlights the need to go beyond representations of gang members and drug sellers solely as vectors of risk to understand the meaning and interpretation of risk in their own lives. Drawing on interview data means that our analysis is at the level of narrative analysis—we have examined the stories told by these young drug sellers about risk, the gendered discourses they bring to describe and interpret risk. While this analysis does not include field observations of young people’s actual negotiation with risks on the street—something that would be fruitful for future research in this area—it does shed light on the ways these young people make sense of risk and the way they assert themselves as active agents of risk, as people who assess the risks they face and make difficult decisions about what risks to take and how.

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Biographies

Molly Moloney, PhD, is a sociologist at the Institute for Scientific Analysis in California. Her research has focused on a number of subject areas, including masculinities, femininities, and parenthood among youth gang members; gender, sexuality, and ecstasy use in the rave scene; the regulatory environment and the changing nighttime economy; and Asian-American youth and young adult illicit drug use. What connects these different projects together is an emphasis on interpretive socio-cultural inquiry that is attentive to meaning, culture, and consumption and a focus on the intersections between identities (gender, sexual, and ethnic) and substance use.

Geoffrey Hunt, PhD, is a professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University, Denmark and senior scientist at the Institute for Scientific Analysis in San Francisco. Dr. Hunt is a social and cultural anthropologist, who has had 30 years experience in planning, conducting, and managing research in the fields of drugs, alcohol, and youth studies. He is currently the principal investigator on an NIH project on Asian-American Gay and Bisexual Men, Club Drugs, and Nightlife. In addition, Dr. Hunt has been involved in a number of large-scale comparative international projects on such issues as drugs and the nighttime economy and drug and alcohol treatment. He has published widely in the field of substance use studies in many of the leading sociology, anthropology, and criminology journals in the United States and the United Kingdom. He and colleagues have just published *Youth Drugs and Nightlife* (Routledge, 2010) and *Drugs and Culture* (Ashgate, 2011).

Karen Joe-Laidler, PhD, is a professor of sociology and the director of the Centre for Criminology at the University of Hong Kong. She has been involved in criminological research—applied and theoretical—in the United States and Hong Kong. In the United States, her interest in the articulation of gender and ethnicity in gangs dates back to the late 1980s. She continues to publish in this area, focusing especially on violence and drugs. In Hong Kong, her research has focused on the sex work industry and drug-related issues,

especially the rise and problems associated with psychotropic drugs, drug-use-related violence, Buddhist interventions with heroin users, and generational differences among heroin users. She is also working on a number of evaluation studies of youth intervention programs.

GLOSSARY

Child protective services	California social services directed to intervene in cases of child abuse and neglect
Governmentality	A concept initially developed by Foucault, which examines the process by which governments through a mixture of institutional policies, regimes, knowledges, practices, and procedures exercise power in late modern societies
Late modern society	Or “Late modernity” refers to contemporary sociological analysis found especially in the work of Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992) in which contemporary individuals must engage in a constant process of self-reflection, or as Beck refers to it as “the emergence of reflexive agency”. As individuals become increasingly free of structural constraints and structural social ties, such as social class, they are free to reflect increasingly on their own selves. Within this process, notions of life-style become increasingly important
Risk society	It is a concept introduced to English-speaking sociologists in the early 1990s and initially developed by Beck in his book, <i>Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity</i> (1992) to identify a central paradox within contemporary society, whereby advances in science and technology inevitably lead to an increasing threat of ecological catastrophes coupled with a heightened risk of mass disasters

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