

THE SPACE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND SELF-INTEREST: CONFLICT AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EXCHANGE IN HEROIN MARKETS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To expand understandings of conflict, this chapter offers a detailed assessment of how exchange is enacted within local heroin markets. Addressing drug dealing and heroin users' buying drugs for their peers (i.e., brokering), this research expands how illegal drug markets are commonly understood. A generalized framework is presented that highlights patterns of exchange.

Approach – Findings come from a 36-month study of a demographically diverse sample of 38 heroin users in Cleveland, OH. Methods involved open-ended, semi-structured interviewing and participant observation, conducted by the author and a team of graduate students.

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Findings – Instead of framing exchange as either an economic or social act, this chapter shows how trade in heroin markets is often both. Here Gudeman’s (2001) dialectic between market and community is embodied in inter-subjectivities of traders, promoting both trust and conflict. In this context, conflict is the result of perpetual ambiguity all market participants can experience.

Research implications – Applying a blended notion of exchange as both social and economic offers new insight on conflict and expands its orientation beyond narratives of political economy. Here, in addition to the economics that often promote conflict, the social elements of exchange (e.g., reciprocity) are emphasized.

Originality – Research has understood conflicts in drug market operations through trader characteristics (e.g., poverty, race, class, privilege). This chapter emphasizes opportunities for conflict irrespective of individualized characteristics by outlining structural elements of exchange.

Keywords: Heroin; dealing; brokering; heroin-buying; exchange; conflict

THE PROBLEM

Most homeless heroin injectors cannot survive as solo operators on the street. They are constantly seeking one another out to exchange tastes of heroin, sips of fortified wine, and loans of spare change. This gift-giving envelops them in a web of mutual obligations and also establishes boundaries of their community. Sharing enables their survival and allows for expressions of individual generosity, *but gifts often go hand in hand with rip-offs.* (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009, p. 6, *emphasis added*)

Illegal drug markets are unforgiving economic environments, and not just for homeless heroin injectors. People addicted to drugs often deploy every possible resource they can obtain, exploit, or imagine to acquire, buy, and use psychoactive substances. Concomitant to and equally harsh is the violence, much of which goes unreported, commonly associated with this economy. People are killed in one-dollar crack disputes, but also, as the case currently in Mexico, in global drug distribution activities. To many, such violence is inevitable. Illegal drugs cost money and are highly valued, people get cheated, disrespected, and/or ripped off, and the result is conflict, which in turn leads directly or indirectly to violence. Violence then becomes institutionalized within illegal drug markets. Ethnographers have

long recognized patterns in the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of people addicted to heroin, often referred to simply as “the Life” to underscore the all-encompassing pursuit of drugs associated with this reality. Systemic factors such as resource scarcity, powerlessness, inequality, injustice, and racism, supported in many ways by the eighty plus year US War on Drugs, are central to understanding this “Life” (Singer, 2006). The historic and endemic lack of economic opportunity for the inner-city poor in particular, as well as other marginalized groups, allows the illegal drug economy to replace its legitimate and socially sanctioned counterpart (Bourgois, 1998; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Bovellev & Taylor, 1985; Campbell, 2008; Hoffer, 2006; Johnson et al., 1985; Page & Singer, 2010; Preble & Casey, 1969; Waldorf, 1973).

But even marginalized heroin addicts craft and maintain meaningful social relationships with others. They form and maintain long-term friendships with other addicts, share and pool scarce resources, cooperate, and accomplish common goals, for example, purchasing drugs together or avoiding overdose. Despite being “substance dependent,” heroin addicts are far from social isolates. Much like non-addicts, people addicted to heroin develop and manage relationships with their peers, as well as with those outside the “Life,” reinforcing the importance of social support and cooperation. An important objective in ethnographic studies of people who use heroin, and other illegal drugs, has been to demonstrate they do not exist within an ultra-violent deviant sub-culture separated from conventional moralities or lifestyles. Most people who use heroin are not so different from their non-using counterparts, and it is important for the public to understand this.

Contrasts also exist in research on drug distribution. In some portrayals of drug selling, while conflict usually exists, actual violence is quite rare (Adler, 1993; Hoffer, 2006; Jacques & Wright, 2015; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Taylor & Potter, 2013; also see Crawford, 2016). However, in these studies drug dealers and their customers are usually not homeless and poor, the drugs are “soft,” and participants are usually white (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Jacques & Wright, 2015). Taylor and Potter (2013) use the concept of “social supply,” when small-time, low-level suppliers and customers are friends. This organization suggests drug markets, “... may take a form that is very different from traditional views of drug markets, conducted by people who are not best understood as being drug dealers” (Taylor & Potter, 2013, p. 393). Similarly, Crawford (2016) contrasts differences between urban and suburban drug markets, highlighting the social nature of suburban dealing contexts. However, the involvement of friends purposefully separates the sociality and cooperation of

participants from “real” drug dealing. Real dealing involves inner-city sales of hard drugs like heroin, and the convention remains that the forces of political economy, race, and privilege are the *only* legitimate analytical frameworks for making sense of conflict.

The following chapter presents conflict in local heroin markets that is not oriented by race, income, or geography. Instead it emphasizes exchange. For a heroin user, exchanging with peers shapes identity and can be a pro-social activity. But many of these exchanges involve heroin, which means they transact a highly valued commodity. In what follows I delineate how this blending provides much greater opportunity for conflict than previously recognized because it potentially requires participants to process irreconcilable motives when interpreting the actions of their trading partners. Here participants are eternally caught in an economy that operates in a tension between community and market (Gudeman, 2008), leaving them unsure of when and when not to cooperate. So although conflict in the heroin economy is at times simply a direct byproduct of a bad trade, that is, a rip off, it also emerges more subtly as a consequence of enacting incompatible belief systems associated with communitarian versus market orientations *during* trade. Anchored to everyday exchanges in this manner, conflict becomes much more egalitarian and no longer tied so directly to scarce resources. It should be noted this perspective does not deny resource scarcity as an independent source of conflict or that poverty amplifies the tension outlined in this chapter. However, by intermingling incommensurable meaning systems within the context of heroin exchange, conflict becomes relevant to *all* heroin users, not just those described by Bourgois and Schonberg or other scholars working with impoverished heroin users. Clearly, all heroin users are not poor and homeless nor is conflict in heroin markets just a problem for those who are.

CAVEATS AND ORIENTATIONS

Starting at defining the term drug dealer, research on illegal drug markets presents challenges. Groundbreaking research in this area outlined numerous and unique roles associated with drug distribution (Preble & Casey, 1969), yet now many of these distinctions seem unclear or arbitrary. In this chapter, a drug (heroin) dealer is simply someone who sells heroin and selling means handing over heroin for money.¹ The terms dealer and seller are exchangeable. The two other groups discussed are buyers and brokers.

Brokering, however, is the act of buying (i.e., copping) drugs for another buyer, meaning these two “groups” (buyers and brokers) are *both* customers who pay a dealer for heroin. For many heroin users brokering is something they intermittently or spontaneously do. It is not a preplanned activity. But for others, brokering is an everyday full-time occupation, a strategy or hustle deployed to afford the heroin they use. Although they can act very much like (low-level) dealers, brokers do not sell heroin. Brokering does not require friendship, which further separates brokering from the “social suppliers” noted above (Taylor & Potter, 2013). Researchers and heroin users agree that brokering is not heroin dealing (Hoffer, 2006). Where then, does this common act fit in the narrative of illegal drug markets and why is it important?

Research on drug distribution usually focuses on (1) *drug dealing* because the act of selling a commodity (in this case heroin) is what defines a marketplace, or (2) *drug dealers* as the primary actors. This implies that customers are not critical in how local heroin markets operate. Ironically, customers seem to have no place in the market² and hence, “Descriptions of drug markets have often concentrated on either distributors or users, but seldom both” (Curtis & Wendel, 2000, p. 124). I argue this is a false dichotomy. *Local heroin markets require brokering, making brokers (i.e., customers) just as relevant as dealers in both defining these spaces, as well understanding their operation.* Brokers are necessary for reasons described later in detail, but for new heroin users they are essential. This is because brokers traverse the space (and barriers) between buyers and sellers, allowing buyers the ability to purchase the drug. More importantly, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that by including brokering in the scope of the drug economy, a broader and more accurate perspective on conflict emerges (see Fig. 1).

However, including brokering, that is, heroin users buying drugs for their peers, complicates the definition of a local heroin market. Research acknowledges open-air and private (or closed) drug markets, with open-air markets being public places that anyone seeking to buy drugs can enter and private markets requiring a buyer have an introduction to a dealer/seller (Hough & Natarajan, 2000). Brokers operate in both these spaces, and often traverse them (Hoffer, 2006). Open-air drug markets exist in inner-city contexts and are frequently the domain of poor black and brown buyers and sellers. Under more economic distress, these markets are portrayed as much more violent than their suburban counterparts (Jacques & Wright, 2015). The drugs themselves also add complexity. For example, marijuana distribution and dealing (Adler, 1993) has been portrayed as less

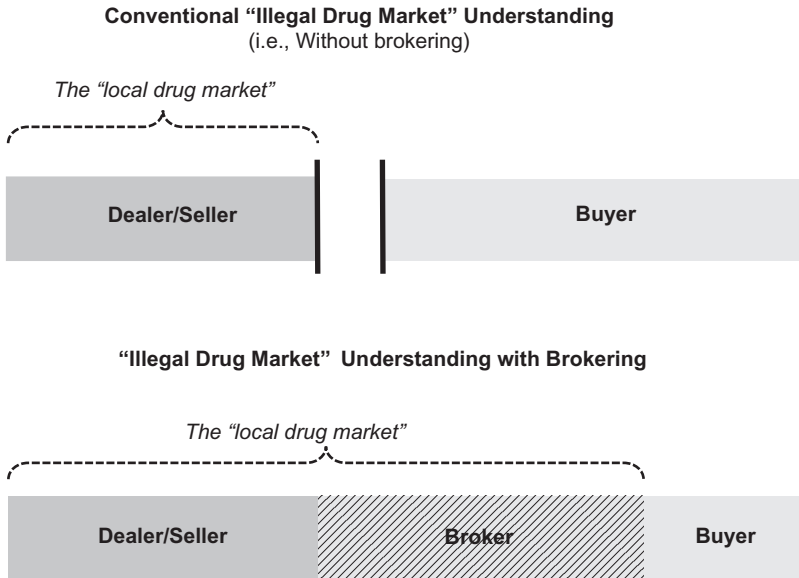


Fig. 1. How Local Heroin Markets are Conventionally Characterized (above) versus How the Author is Conceptualizing Them (below). While an Important Divide Exists between Dealers (or Sellers) and Buyers in Conventional Understandings, the Author Argues this Separation is Less Distinct because Brokers Constantly Traverse this Space. As Buyers Frequently and Easily Transition to and from Brokering, the Heroin Economy Encompasses More of a User’s Everyday Life.

violent than the sale of crack cocaine (Jacobs, 1999). Finally, geography underwrites all of the above. Drug markets typically occur in defined *places*, meaning the sociopolitical and historic context is important to: the city spaces markets occupy (Bourgois, 1995; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009); who the dealers are in those spaces (Hamid, 1991); how markets adapt and change over time (Hoffer, 2006); and how trends are patterned through markets (Agar & Reisinger, 2002).

Although a major way in which heroin users acquire the drug, brokering does not fit with narratives of race (i.e., heroin users of all races broker), economics (i.e., heroin users do not need money to broker), or geography (i.e., brokers move both within and also between places). Urban versus suburban distinctions do not apply either because brokers often serve to bridge these spaces. In fact, a major benefit to brokering, to both users and the

market, is precisely this generic placelessness. Witnessing how people enact local drug markets demonstrates both why ethnography is important but also a major drawback. Historically, the variation and nuance presented in illegal drug market research has suppressed the generalizability that developing theory and public policy requires (Curtis & Wendel, 2000). The conundrum for the ethnographic researcher is to advocate that *either* local variation *or* generalized patterns are what matter. Although research has attempted to bridge this divide by constructing broad analytic frameworks (Curtis & Wendel, 2000; Jacques & Wright, 2011), comparing markets (Mars et al., 2015; see Crawford, 2016), or defining market models (Brownstein & Taylor, 2007), most reinforce a localized perspective highlighting unique places, situations, and people. Without denying the importance of intra- and inter-group variation, in what follows the author emphasizes how the *structure* of exchange, which is not dependent on location, geography, or time, contributes to the production of conflict.

METHODS AND SETTING

Findings presented in this chapter come from a 36-month ethnographic study of the heroin market in Cleveland, OH (2009–2012) funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS-0724320). The project involved participant observation as well a mixture of in-depth open-ended and informal interviews, and was conducted by a team of medical anthropology graduate students under the direction of the author.

Before interviewing heroin users, a 9-month Rapid Assessment Process (Beebe, 2001) was conducted to collect general information about heroin use and the heroin market in Cleveland. This involved compiling local news reports and available health statistics and service data related to drug use, as well as extensive interviews with local drug treatment and other social service providers who interacted with local heroin users. This information was used to: (1) develop baseline data on the local drug scene and (2) map open-air drug market areas in the city, later used in participant interviews.

A number of things about Cleveland are relevant to this chapter. First, there are no large open-air drug markets in the city but rather a number of small relatively inconsequential ones. Most users purchased heroin, which was plentiful and not particularly expensive (\$10 per bag) or high in purity, from private dealers not working on the street. While youth gangs are

present in the city and involved in selling heroin, this was limited. During the time frame of this study, and like much of the country, Cleveland was experiencing a major increase in the misuse of prescription opiate medications and some of these users were beginning to move to heroin. Finally, the amount of travel involved in this study indicated heroin use was equally prevalent in Cleveland's suburban townships as it was within the city.

Thirty-eight ($N = 38$) not-in-treatment heroin users were enrolled in this study using a mix of community outreach and chain-referral from initial participants recruited from the local syringe exchange program (SEP). Using client data provided by the SEP, the study purposefully recruited a sample reflective of local user demographics, with an exception to oversample female users. The final sample was diverse: 47% White, 31% African American, 21% Hispanic, 1% Mixed Ethnicity; 42% Female. The average age of participants was 44 years old, and the average length of use was 16 years. Although precise economic data was not collected, only 1% of the sample self-reported being homeless and the majority received income from formal and informal employment. The sample was *not* poor but they were not "privileged." Like most heroin users in the area, they existed in the large gap between poverty and the middle-class.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to cover a range of topics including micro-level exchange behavior associated with buying and selling heroin. Most participants were interviewed between three and six times; a total of 127 interviews were conducted (25% of which occurred in the field). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and participants were paid \$20 per interview. All interviews were audio recorded and 48% were transcribed verbatim. Forty-six observation field notes were recorded and all transcripts and field notes were entered into a database and coded for a priori and emergent themes (Bernard & Ryan, 1998) using Atlas.ti. The research team conducted this research with the protection of a Certificate of Confidentiality (granted by the Department of Health and Human Services) and the CWRU Human Subject Institutional Review Board approved all study protocols and procedures.

EXCHANGE

Implied in the quotation at the beginning to this chapter, to discuss exchange means revisiting a long-standing discourse in anthropology (and sociology) that contrasts *gift exchange* (a.k.a., non-market or traditional

exchange) emphasizing reciprocity or the moral elements of transfers, and *market exchange* highlighting the rational and economic. Debating if an “economy” was embedded or a distinct domain based on exchange (a.k.a., the Formalist–Substantivist debate) occupied much debate in anthropology (and sociology) but ended in the 1980s unresolved in arguments concerning human nature, most notably in debates on “selfishness” and “altruism” (Chibnik, 2011; Wilk & Cliggett, 2007). But most heroin addicts exchange with their peers and/or dealers on a daily basis making this domain unavoidable. However, modern understandings of an economy no longer rely on contrasting the market and community but are instead oriented toward how these systems overlap and conflict (Gudeman, 2001). Taking these notions into an analysis of exchange within local heroin markets has particular relevance here.

Marcel Mauss (1925) defined non-market or gift exchange. Speaking of “primitive” or “traditional” economies, and following the work of Malinowski, for Mauss exchange was reciprocity (Gudeman, 2001; Mauss, 1990). In gift-based exchanges things traded, given away, and/or distributed embody membership and participation in a culture, group, or collective. Community values associated with identity, status, power, and belonging were conferred via the non-monetized transfer associated with gift-giving. But so were dependencies. Gift-giving embodied non-economic bonds that united participants exchanging but also extended them via the social debt that gifts promoted. The moral obligation of a gift promoted return giving, reinforcing the notion there are “no free gifts.” Gifts were something different from commodities; gifts were personal, not quantified, and inalienable (Gregory, 2015; Strathern, 1992). Conversely, anthropologists have also noted that gifts “not” given served the same purpose in defining membership of a group (Weiner, 1992). In other words, what was held back and not given also reinforced community within the framework of the gift.

Often credited to Adam Smith, market or commodity exchange is ubiquitous. It is the foundation of free-market capitalism and the neo-classical study of economics. In this form of exchange individuals are perfectly rational decision-makers and motivated by their own self-interest. Commodities are homogenized via price, which makes exchange autonomous. With value in what is bought and sold quantified, everyone has the innate ability to fulfill his or her needs through this exchange. Market exchange does not require that people exchanging have any prior social relationship, nor does it require extending relations beyond the actual transaction. There is no debt. This universal utility function inoculated market exchange decisions from emotion but also disconnected “economy”

from other societal domains such as “kin” or “religion.” Of course, despite a seemingly ever-growing literature in economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, and other fields demonstrating that people are imperfect decision-makers, do not accurately assess costs or benefits, and are emotional in making decisions, the convention remains that economic rationality is precisely what motivates the decisions people make in the market-based exchange of commodities.

Market exchange is easier to conventionally measure (and understand) than the reciprocity associated with gift exchange. After worth is quantified, the utility function associated with this form of exchange can be generically applied (Chibnik, 2011). In fact, the motivations of market participants become irrelevant because they can be assumed and justified via determining costs and benefits. In this manner, the calculus associated with utility can be applied to any decision, even holiday gift-giving.³ Nearly all exchange decisions and the operation of all “markets” can be understood via rationality (see Becker, 1976; Levitt & Dubner, 2005). However, it should be emphasized that just because such rationality *can* be applied does not make it either valid or accurate in representing, explaining, or predicting behaviors or beliefs (Chibnik, 2011).

In modern studies of exchange, the economy is presented as both market *and* communal exchange, but in conflict: “economy is built around the dialectical relation of two realms, mutuality and trade, and contains a tension between two ways of making material life—for the self and for others” (Gudeman, 2008, p. 14). For Gudeman (2008, 2001), the economy coalesces two selves, or “selfways” (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayma, 1997), of a trader: the “individual” and the “person-in-community” (Gudeman, 1992), or individual-self and self-connected-to-others. This juxtaposition is characterized within exchange by what Evers and Schrader (1994) label the “Traders’ dilemma”: “the dilemma faced by traders arises out of their moral obligation to share proceeds with kinfolk and neighbors, on one hand, and the necessity to make profits and accumulate capital, on the other” (p. 3). An economy is both how individuals improve within a group, and the moral responsibilities and obligations that connect them to others as members of the group. It is trade, or market-based exchange, fostering self-interest (via rational thinking) *and* reciprocity, fostering individuals “extending their base,” and offering membership in their community to others. As Gudeman (2008) emphasizes:

When individual traders participate in a market as representatives of a community, mutual obligations link their trading resources and returns to others. These traders

exchange with commitments on what they offer and receive, for the purpose of the trade is to maintain the community on which they and others depend. Because these trades are impersonal, calculated, and bargained, the traders continuously shift between the contradictory roles of being a person-in-community and an individual. (102)

This understanding of an economy reinvigorates the relevance of exchange, especially within the context of local heroin market activity. Without a clear separation of communal and market exchange, motives associated with exchange can easily leave the Trader's dilemma unresolved. It is from this comingling of systems in the minds of traders where the locus of conflict in the heroin economy emerges.

THE ECONOMIC HEROIN TRADE

The novelty of decisions that heroin users make when interacting with peers and dealers is that acts of exchange initiate *two* meaning systems. The most obvious is the "economic" wherein participant's beliefs and behaviors are organized based on the conventional way heroin markets are understood as economic systems. Expectations are anchored to the undisputed fact of heroin as a *commodity*, and in its exchange participants evaluate price, costs, value, and risk weighed against benefits and opportunities. In this fashion, heroin users are no different in the ways that they perceive drug markets than the non-drug using public. We are all socialized as consumers to evaluate goods and services in this manner. This internal dialogue is not dissimilar from neo-classical notions of rational economic self-interest. Heroin users evaluate costs and payoffs, selfishly deciding what is best for them in satisfying their addiction. In its most reductionist form, decisions framed by this meaning system align with the rational addiction model originally outlined by [Becker and Murphy \(1988\)](#). Heroin users are conscious of costs and benefits and seek to maximize benefits.

But anthropologists also recognize other features of drug use. Namely, drugs are powerful substances that are meaningful to the lives of those who use them as "symbolic mediators," bringing groups of people together in important ways, shaping their identity, and defining group membership in the process ([Carlson, 2006](#)). Used in traditional contexts, that is, when not illegal, psychoactive substances reinforce social cohesion, group roles, and status, and are used as medicine to heal mind, body, and soul ([Myerhoff, 1974](#)). On the other hand, when substances become *illegal* they are transformed into commodities imbued with the power to control, subjugate, and

dominate others (Singer, 2006). This does not mean legal goods or services cannot also be commodified or that just because something becomes illegal it becomes commodified. The process of commodification is complex. Access to substances through tradition, shared norms, and/or community values is now combined with access via monetized capital, potentially changing how users make exchange decisions.

As people use heroin they become members of the heroin-using “community.” Exchanging with their peers is an important way this membership is defined. Gift exchange processes are central in the formation of this identity and the things heroin users exchange as gifts include: (1) material resources (e.g., heroin, syringes, and other drug paraphernalia); (2) services (e.g., access to drugs); and (3) information (e.g., who are the “good” and “bad” dealers, how to avoid overdosing). Such acts imply reciprocity and non-compliance is sanctioned. The point being emphasized in this chapter is simply that, in the context of heroin markets, these types of gift exchanges are also economic transactions because heroin and *all* things connected to its use are highly valued as commodities. Therefore, if a heroin user gives another user a “taste” (a small amount of drug) because they are beginning to experience heroin withdrawal it is both an act of “kindness,” with an expected return, AND an economic transaction, because the heroin provider costs the giver money.⁴

Instead of denying illegal drugs as either commodities *or* social mediators, in what follows I offer heroin as both. Furthermore, it is the joint performance of both of these systems within exchange that frames conflict. Here, commodification of an illegal drug does not *replace* its social power to build community or construct identity. Although social functions of heroin do not *replace* the drugs commodified value, they cannot be disregarded in its exchange. Among those addicted, heroin is authorized with social efficacy but such authority is inseparable from its reality as a commodity. This means what is being traded in a heroin exchange is not always obvious.

THE SOCIAL HEROIN TRADE

Money, and by proxy drugs, orient the ways heroin users think and trade within the economic meaning system. This is market-based reasoning. On the other hand, social meaning associated with heroin is oriented via reciprocity, much like a gift. Two social obligations passed along during a heroin exchange are: (1) to respect the illegal nature of the interaction and to

(2) trade “fairly.” These obligations are exposed *during*, but also perpetuate *after*, an exchange because as one commitment can be discharged by its act (i.e., trading fairly) the other indefinitely extends relations between parties (i.e., respecting the illegal nature of the exchange). This implies that just like gift exchange, heroin transfers incur social debt and *never* clear balances between those exchanging. These exchanges define heroin users as members of the heroin-using community. But this parallel social transfer has no monetary value and behaving in accordance with these norms is the only way traders can provisionally satisfy obligations.

Most participants do not want to be known to outsiders for using, buying, or selling heroin. At a minimum, people who buy and sell heroin are obligated to keep their exchange, that is, business, a secret. As a result, the first way community is forged between exchanging parties is that it gives them common knowledge about their trading partner(s) they must safeguard. The responsibility to protect this knowledge is perpetual. Heroin exchange baptizes participants into a secretive group and protecting this secrecy is fundamentally a *social* obligation. Understood in boarder terms, this obligation is instrumental to this economy but has no economic “value.” It cannot be bought or sold. In fact, among illegal drug users the “snitch,” or paid police informant, is universally despised precisely because s/he trades this social obligation for money. But the real challenge of the heroin economy concerns replacing assurances, that is, institutionalized trust, taken for granted in the legal and modern economy.

TRUST AND TRADING “FAIRLY”

In conventional markets, people who buy and sell commodities can be socially distant, strangers, or unknown to one another because the value of what they exchange, as represented by standards such as price, is understood to clear obligations. The same assumption is made of heroin markets. However, the conundrum of both markets is, to successfully trade, trading partners must overcome distrust. In modern markets, various institutions reduce uncertainty, allowing traders to take risks, that is, lowering transaction costs by enforcing contracts. By contrast, in non-modern, or traditional markets, social relations between traders operate to reduce risk and lower costs. Social obligations (outside the market context) reduce distrust and allow traders to interact.

Solutions for people addicted to heroin are more complicated because heroin addicts unanimously self-report distrusting other addicts. Addicts

know first-hand not having the drug one needs can result in desperation. The threat of going into withdrawal can motivate any user to cheat, lie, and steal. Participants recognize this potential in both themselves and others. Trust in this context is maladaptive; it exposes participants to exploitation and/or outright theft. Distrust is a rational position for someone exchanging and is clearly communicated by many users:

So I know what this drug will do to somebody, you know, and what they're capable of doing [pause] when they're trying to get money to get the stuff. You know? So, no, I wouldn't trust anybody in my house, 'cause I have a lot of shit, man. I have a lot of tools and stuff like that there's somewhere they can go and, bam, there's a quick forty bucks, you know. (Kenny,⁵ a 48-year-old, African American man)

... I ain't gonna trust a motherfuckin' junkie with my money, you know, 'cause they, this guy, he ain't got no job, he's, he's ... You know, like I know guys out on the street that burgl... they burglarize houses ... Steal guys ... people's TVs, lawn mowers and all that shit, to sell to get the money to get their fix. I'm not gonna put money in their hands. "Hey, man, we'll give you five bags," because the motherfuckers, they'll open up your bag and they'll take a third of it. (Alonzo, a 70-year-old, African American man)

There ain't no trust in drugs honey. (Betty, a 57-year-old, African American woman)

But although heroin users superficially talk of not trusting other users, what they say and how they act are often different. When confronted by this inconsistency, users acknowledge they trust other users, but such trust is usually only partial, reaffirming trust as a threshold point along a distribution (Gambetta, 2000). Complete distrust is untenable in economic transactions that occur on a daily basis and that support one's physical and psychological well-being. As participants explained, total distrust is even more implausible when users are enmeshed in the lives of the people they trade with:

P: And I trust my husband to an extent. I don't trust him either. And he don't trust me, either, ha ha, you know?

I: How come?

P: Because of drugs. Drugs got to do with everything. When we're not, when we're clean and we're not using, there can be trust, because, remember, the drug is not in the way anymore. (Kelley, a 37-year-old, Caucasian woman)

I: How do you trust E...

P: We, we went to school together, see we was... Then, as I said, we were in prison together. We was on the streets together, you know what I'm saying. I ain't just met E (64-year-old, African American) a couple of years ago; I been knowing E over thirty years. See what I'm saying? And E's been gettin' high just as long as I've been gettin' high, off and on. (Alonzo, a 70-year-old, African American man)

I: How would you define the word “trust?”

P: Um [long pause] I guess trust would be believing that somebody was gonna do what they say they’re gonna do. [pause] You know. Knowing that that person is not gonna do harm to you.

I: Do you trust other users?

P: No.

I: No? Why do you say that?

P: ‘Cause I wouldn’t trust me. I mean addicts are out for themselves, and they’re gonna do whatever they have to [pause] for themselves ... if it means ripping you off.

[pause]

I: So, we’ve heard about people like putting money together with someone and going and buying heroin together.

P: Um humm.

I: Um [pause] is that trust or what is that?

P: I mean [pause] I guess that would be trust, because you’re trusting that when you get the stuff and you split it up everybody’s gonna – you’re not gonna think the other person’s gonna try and rip you off. But like I do it with my mom and my stepdad. I know we’re, whatever we get, we’re splitting it evenly, so ... (Eric, a 25-year-old, Caucasian man)

These narratives underscore the ways personal relationships influence users’ “trust” of other users, and its partial and contingent nature. Preexisting personal relations do not always exist, nor are they a reliable proxy for trust in this setting. In legal markets uncertainty is diminished through formal institutions designed for this purpose (e.g., formal contracts). Heroin markets also have a solution designed for testing and building trust, fair trade.

The second social obligation transferred via exchange in heroin transactions and which serves to build trust is to trade fairly. But for an exchange to be “fair” there must be normative standards to evaluate ones trading partner. Individual characteristics such as sex, age, and race, as well as a shared personal history can influence beliefs, but heroin users are suspicious of such extrinsic factors because they understand, from their personal experience, that addiction can undermine any previous honest or sincere behavior. Hart (2000) notes that among Frafra migrants of urban Ghana, communal ties are insufficient for trust in economic transactions.

In any case kinship is a poor foundation for the reckoning of two-sided economic relations, especially unequal relations, since its central postulate is identity, sameness, a

collective self defined by opposition to the generalized other. The idea of shared but separate interests cannot be expressed through a kinship idiom. (9)

As a result, to evaluate exchanges participants rely on the *rules of exchange*. Rules allow the behaviors of people exchanging to be judged based on merit, providing “evidence” supporting decisions, and shaping normative expectations. When rules are violated, parties can reconsider whether to continue relations, discontinue or punish trading partners. Here rules apply to buyer–seller relations (transactions), as well as in peer-to-peer exchange.

In buyer–seller relations, rules are organized through generalized market-based standards. A buyer evaluates a “fair” exchange with a dealer via a simple rule: their money, or other resources, purchases the expected amount of drug. If the customer concludes a deal was “good” they are more likely to believe, and trust, the next deal will be good and return to the dealer. This same evaluation occurs within the context of brokering, meaning buyers evaluate brokers “deals” in the same way they evaluate an exchange from an actual dealer, primarily because the deal they get is from the broker not the dealer. Heroin dealers also evaluate buyers based on rules but these are more complicated and often reflect features of sales venues, contexts, and settings, all of which are highly variable. In the author’s previous ethnography, he has written extensively about dealer rules and how they were managed by two dealers working in Denver, CO (Hoffer, 2006). Successful deal making can proxy trust, but other factors like how consistent dealers have drugs, how they treat customers, if prices are consistent, and personality factors can also affect such assessments.

In general, rules governing heroin transactions are ideals, transitory parameters used to make evaluations. More often they are unspecified, poorly communicated, uncertain in practice, subject to interpretation, unevenly applied, and may change at any moment. Despite this ambiguity in rules, over time heroin users and dealers can build trust with one another. In this framework, *respect* and trust are often synonymous. Within informal economic contexts, rule-based social norms signaling respect has been acknowledged in crack sales (Bourgois, 1995), and in contexts of urban poverty (Anderson, 1999).

But although rules associated with heroin dealing may be flexible and are framed by the drug as a commodity, the same is *not* true of heroin exchanges between peers even though these too are a major feature of market operations. Trust in peer relationships requires demonstrating generosity and forgoing (if only temporarily) heroin as a commodity. Examples of

these exchanges pervade the day-to-day lives of heroin users. For instance, a heroin user demonstrates generosity when s/he gives a “taste” of heroin, that is, a small amount of heroin for free, to a peer when they are sick, that is, starting to feel the effects of withdrawal. However, in this chapter I focus on a more frequent and equally well-established exchange between peers that builds and tests trust, and also one that socializes neophytes to the dual belief systems it enacts: *copping drugs for others*.

MENTORED RECIPROCITY

The process of “copping drugs for others” involves one heroin user (a broker) taking another heroin user’s money to make a drug purchase for them. This is an indirect transaction, meaning the broker is expected to return to the buyer with drug. The bi-dimensional notion of exchange is initiated, authorized, and reinforced through this act. But brokering is a contested activity because a buyer is expected, no matter what the circumstance, to give up some of the heroin purchased to pay the broker. Ian, a Puerto Rican man in his 30s, describes this dilemma of brokering:

It was [loudly] hard to get up into that house, you know, because I used to have to go through somebody. I had, I had to give ‘em my money and they’d go up there and they’d cop and it’d cost me a bag. Well, there’d be days, man, I couldn’t afford to give a motherfucker a ten-dollar bag, you know. Well, you know, if that’s all you got is thirty bucks, man, and you get three bags, then you gotta give a motherfucker one, and you need at least three to keep from getting sick, you know, that shit gets old. (Ian, a 30 something, Puerto Rican man)

Despite this predicament, brokering is a very common practice central to heroin markets. For over forty years, researchers have recognized brokering in heroin markets. In early accounts, “copping” was a catchall term used to define purchasing heroin for oneself or others; later, the “accommodator” was described as a person who bought heroin for others, receiving heroin or money in return (Preble & Casey, 1969). Goldstein (1981) produced the first extensive modern ethnographic account of copping, outlining how heroin users opportunistically “get over,” making money and drugs, through this indirect transaction. During the 1990s, ethnographic research on HIV injection risk behaviors briefly renewed interest in brokering, documenting how users divide drug shares and pool money in the process of copping, increasing risks associated with disease transmission (Koester & Hoffer, 1994; Page, Smith, & Kane, 1990).

Brokering also figured prominently in what remains one of the more comprehensive surveys of crime and drug consumption among active heroin users. In a sample of 201 daily heroin users in New York City, the most popular non-dealing drug-business crime reported to offset heroin costs was “Steering, Touting, and Copping” (STC) (Johnson et al., 1985). “Steerers and Touts” worked for dealers, respectively directing customers to and promoting products in exchange for a payment from a dealer. “Cop men” transferred money and drugs between customers and dealers, but as the authors noted, because of the extensive overlap in these roles they were combined in analysis.⁶ Data revealed that: (1) STC occurred more frequently than direct drug sales, defined as face-to-face transactions with dealers, (2) 75% of all heroin users participated in these activities, and (3) heroin users earned nearly \$3,000 annually in drug income from them.

Brokered drug sales are popular and symbiotically co-exist with dealing because they offer both individual and market-level advantages to participants in illegal drug markets. First and maybe most importantly, a broker does not need *money* to acquire heroin. Broker sales also exponentially increase an individual user’s access to a drug, significantly lowering search costs. In markets where law enforcement officers pretend to be buyers or sellers to make arrests, risks to participants are significantly reduced by brokering because the broker already knows both the buyer and seller. The market also benefits because customers can access heroin from different sources.

Brokering provides participants entrée to a trading system that is hidden, but also allows movement within one that is restricted. New users often need someone to introduce them, that is, connect them, to a drug source and the broker is both gatekeeper and guide. Even in “open” street-based heroin markets access can be significantly restricted by race, income, experience, age, and sex (Hoffer, 2006). In this environment, brokers thrive. For participants already exchanging, trade might be restricted for a variety of reasons, including when a seller is arrested, temporarily runs out of heroin, decides not to sell to a customer (e.g., to punish them, see below), or simply disappears. Here brokering serves as an insurance policy often initiated spontaneously during the course of a heroin user’s everyday activity, as Bobby, a 38-year-old Caucasian man, illustrates:

Well, it’s, it’s not usually like a complete stranger will call me, but like if I’m at a friend’s house, you know, and there’s people, his friends over, you know, they’ll, “Hey, can I get your number in case I can’t get it [heroin] off Terry sometime?” ... “Let me

get your number. Yeah, let's kick it sometime," and then they'll end up calling me, you know, "Hey, can you get me something?"

The critical lesson set in motion by this exchange has a simple heuristic: the "golden rule." By having someone "cop" for them, new heroin users learn the rules but, more importantly, they are *forced* to accept and comply with this new form of exchange if they want to continue to have access to heroin. Copping is internalized as a *social* contract between traders but also one immediately put to the test because, although a buyer's money actually purchases the drug, the broker (peer) has *helped* and is entitled to a share of what was purchased.

Paying a broker does not terminate relations. If it did such payments could simply be considered merely a "service fee" or "commission." Once a broker is paid, that is, given drug, the *economic* portion of the obligation is discharged but a balance associated with its *social* obligation remains. In other words, the customer now owes the broker *help*. This unpaid debt is connected to a broker (1) offering access to a closed system, and (2) exchanging "fairly," that is, not simply stealing the buyer's money. As such, it signifies incentives for cooperation managed via reciprocity and not economics. In other words, the essential element of "copping drugs for others" pertains to the social obligations it fosters.

Through these social obligations, a heroin buyer becomes remodeled into a full-fledged member of a heroin-using community. The economic importance of the exchange is only transitory, that is, one drug purchase. Outsiders might assume when buying heroin users do not *owe* anything to their peers. But this diminishes and obscures the perpetual obligation and reciprocity that defines membership in this community. Telling the story of her husband copping for a mutual friend, Janet, a Puerto Rican woman in her 30s, is direct about this:

And he went out in the rain and the cold and got this person the stuff and this person didn't wanna give him nothing. And my husband is – I mean, he's, not that he's a sucker or nothing. He's kindhearted, you know, he's a good person, whatever ... And when he seen me coming in, and I'm like, "Wait a minute. What? Now, he's not gonna give you shit? And it's already eleven o'clock at night and you're out there doing this and doing that. He can't come here no more.

In other words, "the Life" gives all heroin addicts obligations to help their peers without whose continued cooperation they cannot acquire heroin or operate within the system.

CONFLICT PROCESSES

In the daily lives of heroin users, exchanges that simultaneously activate economic and social belief systems are extensive. Copping drugs for others, extending credit, paying debts, pooling resources and cooperative drug buying, communicating information about dealers, jointly acquiring money for drugs, dividing drug shares, and giving gifts of heroin, syringes, or other supplies *all* activate bi-dimensional meaning. For many people with heroin addictions, buyer–broker or buyer–dealer exchanges are daily events, making it important to consider how participants manage this blended exchange relative to the conflict it produces.

Buyer–Broker Conflict

The heroin economy confuses relations between heroin users because many of their exchanges are neither “favors” nor “services” but, as demonstrated by brokering, some combination of both. Favors and services occur with different expectations. A favor symbolizes and builds friendship and, like a gift, such acts occur without an economic balance but incur social obligation and debt. On the other hand, a service is a transaction that requires a return payment. Brokering is the quintessential example of this.

When brokering *works* it provides a buyer access to a commodity as a service *and* transfers trust via the obligation of “fair” trade as a favor. But “fairness” is immediately questioned because of built-in opportunities for a broker to cheat the buyer. In the space separating buyer and seller, a broker can: (1) inflate the price of heroin, and/or (2) take some and/or replace the drug before returning to the buyer. This means, as noted above, the buyer evaluates a broker using the same criteria as in a direct purchase with a dealer. Just like dealing, brokering is a test that can both credit and discredit with neither result guaranteed. When Nancy, a 37-year-old Caucasian woman, was ripped-off in a brokered deal, brokering was a failed test. However, for Karen, a twenty something Caucasian woman, the test worked. While for Kenny, a 48-year-old African American man, the “test” was not worth the hassle.

I: When you did that, were you surprised that she never came back?

Nancy: Not really [pause] because I knew, I had, in a way, I, I trusted her, and I didn't. I wasn't sure. I said, “This is the way I'll find out [pause] if I can trust her.” And she did what I thought she was gonna do. It wasn't that much money, so [pause] I didn't make a big thing out of it, but that kept her away from me. I know who to be around, who not to be around.

Karen: Well, I used to give my dude money and I thought he was rippin' me off and like I bought a scale with a slide, and so, and like he never did. That's why I trust him to this day, because from the very beginning, he could have been ripping me off, but he didn't, and I was just some stupid girl that was just like, [speaking in a little girl tone] "Do you know where I can find some heroin?" like [laughter]... He like was totally legit the whole time, so ...

Kenny: I mean, I, I have, [brokered] in the past, but I don't like doing it, because, you know, if, if, if I go and I cop, if I get a couple bags, and this guy opens his bag up and it's, it's not the way he likes it, he's gonna accuse me of pinchin' it. "Hey, man, this bag's kind of small. You been in my bag?" "Naw, man," but I don't even wanna be accused of that shit, so, I, you know, I, I don't, I don't get involved in it, you know. You're just askin' for trouble, you know.

But even when brokering *works* buyers can still be unsure if they can ultimately trust the broker. This assessment is impossibly entangled yet critical for future relations. This is because some brokers will "pinch" the packages of drugs purchased before returning to the buyer. And buyers are aware of this because many of them also broker and frequently pinch packages.

The only thing is, we cop for people and then we take out. We tell 'em we're not gonna take anything out, but we always do. We, you know, on her way home — 'cause she usually goes and I stay with 'em — she takes out like half of it, or less than half, whatever seems fair, and then they have to give us some, knowing that we took some out. But that's just the way it goes. (Camila, a 44-year-old Caucasian woman)

No, I don't tell them that we, we pinch it. We tell 'em that's what they got. "That's what you got, dude. You better be happy with it, 'cause you're not getting none of what we took." Sometimes we'll even take, pinch it and then tell them that they have to give us some. Sometimes ... We're dirty. We're dirty. We're, we're not, I'm not to be trusted. (Susan, a 42-year-old Caucasian woman)

As demonstrated by brokering, resolving relationships in terms of "friendship" or "economic utility," becomes impossibly mired for heroin users, resulting in what one user noted bluntly: "There are no friends in this game, only associates." Unable to classify exchange, heroin addicts can perceive their peers as hostile, unpredictable, unstable, or untrustworthy. Ironically, this outcome may have little to do with the peer but rather the nature of heroin exchange that does not allow clarity.

Buyer—Dealer Conflict

In the legal economy, if we were told a good is not available, it would be unusual to question the honesty of the salesperson. Salespeople are anonymous and, we assume, honest in their intention for our business. Here only one *type* of exchange is being enacted, market exchange, and hence

the result is not personal. Heroin dealers are motivated by economics, and know they will lose a sale if they deny a customer. But they might have a reason for doing this, that is, the customer may have violated some rule the dealer uses to evaluate the customer (see Hoffer, 2006, for numerous examples of this). Here the dealer is “sending a message” to punish and potentially modify a customer’s problematic behavior. In this instance, social meaning is motivating dealer action. While the customer assumes that, just like a seller in a legal marketplace, a heroin seller’s behavior is fundamentally economic, social motives are incongruent with this expectation. In these instances, confusion is a byproduct of both systems being enacted simultaneously.

Like consumers in the legal economy, heroin buyers appreciate when dealers seek their patronage and do not simply treat them as a customer. “Fronts,” credit, and free heroin are common exchanges between dealers and customers that promote this. They also foster incongruent interpretations. A “front” is when a dealer gives a customer an amount of heroin with the expectation that it will be paid for later. Credit is slightly different in that the customer only asks for part of the sale amount to be owed. Although rare, dealers also give customers “free” heroin as a bonus when they purchase large amounts of drug. They may also give customers heroin when they know the customer is sick and needs to get “well.” In essence, these behaviors have the same economic consequence; heroin is acquired without paying. However, misinterpretations are common in these interactions because both social and economic meaning is enacted.

IMPLICATIONS

If heroin exchange comingles systems of meaning people use to orient to their trading partners, conflict can be imagined within the heroin economy in a much more inclusive way. Instead of choosing between “soft,” suburban, affluent, and white drug market interpretations where social relations (i.e., “social supply”) are important *or* “hard,” inner-city, poor, and black and brown drug market interpretations where money (i.e., political economy) matters most, this chapter argues that both are central to the exchange processes illegal drug markets perpetuate. This framing generates a typology of conflict whereby “compatible” exchange conflicts emerge from transactions that enact similar balances of meaning between participant interpretations. Here both parties understand the balance, or weight,

of an exchange as either social or economic. In the example above, if the customer correctly interprets the dealer’s decision not to sell to them as a product of having violated the dealer’s rules, a “compatible” conflict would ensue. On the other hand, “incongruent” exchange conflict surfaces if the customer decides the dealer’s decision was economic. Here participants decode actions by applying meanings different from what their trading partner intends. As heroin exchange animates *both* systems, it provides abundant opportunity to assert discordant schemas to *any* single exchange event (see Fig. 2).

Yet it is clear, conflict can arise even when people exchanging heroin have the same interpretation of an exchange event. If a dealer sells fake drug or a customer steals drugs (from either a dealer or peer), both parties recognize this as an economic crime. A “rip-off” is a consequence of both parties understanding the transgression as economic. Based on this mutual understanding of motives, ensuing punishment is *rational*. In essence, both parties apply the same logic. Sanctions aligned in this way reinforce or confirm norms. Although I do not suggest such acts are tolerable, they can be rationally understood because for participants, offenders “get what they deserve,” or “should have known better.” Someone clearly “broke” the rules as understood by *both* parties. Much of the violence associated with heroin, or other illegal drugs, can be classified as an outcome of compatible conflicts.

Incongruent conflicts are unsettling because they are difficult for participants to recognize or mediate. They also may produce actions that seem illogical or out-of-line. Here a trader commits a Type I (seeing what is not

		Person 1	
		Economic	Social
Person 2	Economic	<i>Compatible</i>	<i>Incongruent</i>
	Social	<i>Incongruent</i>	<i>Compatible</i>

Fig. 2. Belief Systems Activated as a Function of a Drug Exchange. Each Exchange Participant (Person 1 and Person 2) Evaluates the Motives of Their Trading Partner and Determines if the Balance of the Exchange is “Economic” or “Social.” In Instances When both Parties Assume the Same Governing System the Event is Compatible, if not the Outcome is Incongruent.

there) or Type II (not seeing what is there) error in assessing trading partner motives. The correct meaning of the exchange is not uniform to both traders. More importantly, repayment or restitution becomes difficult if not impossible to enact. Here we can imagine a *compatible* conflict emerging if a customer “shorts” a dealer (i.e., pays less than expected) and both parties position this act via economics. The customer subsequently paying the dealer what is owed potentially resolves this conflict. With both participants framing exchange using compatible criteria, a mutual solution exists. However, paying the dealer back is unacceptable, and may even be insulting if an incongruent conflict arises from a short. In this instance the dealer believes the customer breaking the rules (i.e., paying less than expected) is more important than the economics (i.e., money) associated with the transaction. To the dealer the violation is *less* connected to heroin as a commodity and *more* connected to the social obligations associated with its exchange (i.e., trading “fairly”). Here the conflict results from the dealer being “ripped-off,” but more importantly, s/he is disrespected, an emotion that can be difficult only to resolve with money.

Incongruent conflict reconciliation requires exchanging parties to identify, distinguish, and acknowledge their error by reimagining the other’s motives. But as a limited ability to do this is what initiates such conflicts in the first place, resolution may be extremely difficult or may never occur. In the subjectivity of the trader making amends to the offended party, an irrational act must transform into rational behavior based on an altered understanding of the meaning of the conflict. But, as previously noted, rules associated with social meanings embedded in exchange are ill-defined. Here traders must reorient their restitution *currency*. In an exchange operating via social obligation, the economics of what is traded may be not as important. Furthermore, just like a gift, total resolution is not possible – there will always be someone in debt.

Remnants of incongruent conflicts can linger in ongoing exchange relations. [Jacobs and Wright \(2006\)](#) note that criminal retaliations may be differed by a number of factors, including the origin of the “injustice” being unclear. Moreover, it is easy to imagine how the more such frustration, that is, unrecognized insult, builds the more subsequent retaliation, punishment, or aggression becomes re-framed as an “irrational” act dislocated from context. For instance, if a person is killed in a one-dollar drug dispute the assumption is the perpetrator was crazy to kill someone over such a small amount of money. This is truly a “senseless” act. Such violence also reinforces our common notion that heroin markets and people in them are severe and unforgiving. But framing exchange as activating

incommensurable meaning systems, the dollar likely had less to do with this outcome than *social* factors obfuscated via the trade. Violence produced from incongruent conflicts is always irrational, and hence unclear, because its justification is only “rational,” and relevant, via the perspective of *one* trader. Because heroin exchange activates both social and economic meaning, the logic of trader’s actions can become hopelessly mired in how exchange acts are defined and what, on balance, they ultimately mean to the participants.

CONCLUSION

Instead of thinking of illegal drug markets as different because participants are more prone to conflict and violence, further othering them, this chapter suggests legal economies and extra-legal ones are not so dissimilar in how they can generate conflict. Gudeman’s perspective on exchange is not dependent on what is being traded but rather on how traders classify actions. In modern markets institutions are in place to protect participants. We also take for granted that in modern markets a clear separation exists between economic and non-economic domains, as this is what has historically differentiated modern markets from their traditional counterparts.

A modern economy demands not only differentiated social institutions for its effective functioning, but a specialized ethical code attuned to the requirements of business, itself only a particular version of the basic value system of the whole society. This code preforms the crucial function of defining the boundaries within which the free play of economic rationality is permitted and of stabilizing the relation of economic to non-economic pursuits within the overall culture. (Geertz, 1963, p. 138)

However, there are many instances when the economic infringes, overlaps, or encroaches upon domains the public considers off-limits. For instance, Sandel (2012) notes that compensating people to stand in line at congressional hearings, paying drug-addicted mothers to get sterilized, or scalping camping spaces at Yosemite National Park conflates what we believe *can* and *should* be bought and sold. Here the same types of conflict noted in heroin exchange emerge among non-users operating in legal economies. The “market” produces an *incongruent* exchange; for one trading partner (the business or government) the exchange is economic but for the other (the public) the balance is social. Analyzing how such imbalanced meanings occur within exchanges tells us much about communal values and how to resolve conflicts. It also normalized heroin markets as modern market participants are also susceptible to exchange conflicts that confuse economic

and social domains. The major difference is that local heroin markets rely on both domains operating concurrently, meaning participants are trapped in this in-between space.

Along the same lines, as this chapter expands and revises the scope of the heroin economy to include customers, it calls for reconsideration of a heroin user's ability to leave it. What is unappreciated is that when someone goes through drug treatment and is "successful" (i.e., becomes drug free) they often have trouble shedding their participation in the heroin economy. For some, the heroin economy is easier to access and engage with compared to the legitimate economy. It is much more flexible and does not require a work history. Further, the heroin economy is associated with a lifestyle familiar to users and offers excitement that some users seek (Schlosser & Hoffer, 2012). It is also a major environment in which heroin users develop long-standing and close relations with their peers. In contrast to conflict, the heroin economy also generates friendship.

Compounding this is that local heroin markets operate in much the same manner as the broader and much larger underground economy; both conflate social and economic relations among participants. Many drug users, including heroin users, come to rely heavily on "off the books" work to pay for their lifestyles. In other words, the entrepreneurship noted within the illegal drug economy extends into the shadows of the legitimate one, and networks of users and non-users coningle in this space. As a result, and much like convicts released from prison, after drug treatment people in recovery often seek economic opportunity going to what they know: the underground economy. And here they also find the people they know: heroin users. In other words, pro-social elements of the heroin economy create social bonds that are difficult to break and offer economic opportunities often essential for survival.

To conclude, the challenge of the heroin economy is not simply that it distributes an illegal commodity to local users but rather *how* this occurs. Heroin fosters community and identity among those who use it, and it is equally relevant as a commodity. The trade of heroin is always personal and never truly anonymous. Applying Gudeman's tension to the micro-landscape of exchange, heroin users are caught between economic motives managed by the market and ongoing social relations managed by reciprocity. This inter-subjective balance offers new ways to characterize interpersonal conflicts traders experience because the ultimate resource being generated and transferred via exchange is trust in one's fellow participants, which is tenuous even in relationships users consider close. Here interpersonal conflicts in heroin exchange are colorblind. Clearly the realities of a

poor, black, homeless versus a white, middle-class teenage heroin addict are very different. Other than a heroin addiction we might assume they have nothing in common. They have distinct life circumstances and levels of resources to support exiting the “Life.” The public also perceives them and their addiction in very different terms, resulting in unequal opportunities. These differences are critical and essential to consider for implementing responsible drug policy. However, both participate in the same economy that blends the social and economic in exchange, leaving them similarly susceptible to interpersonal conflict. The heroin economy facilitates local commerce by not fully adopting a market system. Instead, it applies an admixture of exchange supporting (and contesting) both the economic and reciprocal functions it requires, trapping market participants in its ambiguity.

NOTES

1. The author acknowledges dealers may trade lots of goods and services for drugs. Nonetheless, trading for money is their prime motive. Dealing also typically involves buying a drug supply whereas selling does not but this distinction is irrelevant to this chapter because the source of the drug is not important to the findings discussed.

2. In the review of this manuscript, a reviewer commented that customers are not part of local heroin markets.

3. For an interesting application of economic rationality applied to Christmas gift-giving, see [Waldfoegel \(2009\)](#).

4. Quantities of heroin given as a “taste” may be very difficult to quantify in economic terms. However, the giver must purchase the drug, which is what is implied in the economic calculation.

5. All names used for participants in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

6. In my nearly twenty years of ethnographic experience with heroin users, dealers, and users who work for dealers, it is very rare to find instances of steering or touting without copping.

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