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Drug mules in the international cocaine trade: diversity and relative deprivation

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Introduction

The film 'Maria Full of Grace'¹ follows a young Colombian girl, through her journey as a drugs mule. The film begins in the rose factory where Maria works. We see her rising early to work long hours in a menial job to support her family. It is clear that she (like so many of us) longs for a better life. This 'better life' is implicitly western and individualistic. After Maria quits her job she discovers she is pregnant. On her way to Bogotá (the capital) to find a job, she encounters a friend of a friend who offers her work as a mule. Her motivations are clear: to escape from poverty for herself and her family no matter how slim the chances of success.

These same stereotypical images of the drugs mule dominate popular media and politics. The research reported sought to look beyond the media image of drug mules to better understand what motivates men and women to work as drug mules. This topic is pertinent given recent policy interest in sentence reform for drug mules.² Although some good research has been done on drug mules (which is outlined in the following section), it has mainly focussed on women from developing nations. This is problematic given that recent research has noted a 'diversification in the social, national and ethnic composition of cocaine couriers, for example old men, entire families with children, young blonde students and European tourists'.³ The purpose of this research was to look at the motivations of a group of mules who are representative of this diversification. In order to do this, research was conducted in prisons in Ecuador. The men and women encountered were from diverse national, cultural, class and ethnic backgrounds. Some were of pensionable

age; others were young students who were under 20 when they were arrested. Some had drug habits, others were in employment. I also encountered several couples who were travelling together (although often one partner was unaware their partner was trafficking drugs). I also met two women who were unknowingly carrying drugs. Unfortunately there is not space to include their experiences here.

What is known about drug mules?

The practice of sending drugs concealed in a person's body (either in the stomach or other orifices), strapped to their body or packed into luggage was first noted in the 1970's.⁴ This practice almost certainly developed in response to increased border security. Research in the area broadly agrees that mules carry drugs which have been paid for by someone else across international borders. They may or may not receive material payment.⁵ Since the early 1980's knowledge about drug mules has come from two main sources: arrest data and interviews with drug mules themselves.

Contrary to the media stereotype, most mules are men. The largest research project analysed data about people arrested for drugs offences at Heathrow airport between 1991 and 1997.⁶ They found that 70 per cent were men and that the most typical method of concealment was in luggage. This data must be interpreted with care as it includes not only drug mules but also people carrying their own drugs (who are considered to be entrepreneurs rather than mules). Nonetheless, similar gender ratios can be encountered in arrest data internationally and in hospital admissions for treatment resulting from complications in swallowing capsules of cocaine.⁷ In the UK most mules come from developing world countries such as Colombia, Jamaica

1. Maria Full of Grace (dir. J. Maston Col/US 2005).
2. Sentencing Advisory Panel (2010). Advice to the sentencing guidelines council: Sentencing for Drug Offences. London, Sentencing Advisory Panel.
3. Zaitch, D. (2002). *Trafficking cocaine: Colombian drug entrepreneurs in the Netherlands*. The Hague; London, Kluwer Law International. P. 144.
4. For example, see Sabbag, R. (1999 [1976]). *Snowblind*. Edinburgh, Rebel Inc.
5. Fleetwood, J. (2010). Drug Trade. *Encyclopedia of women in today's world*. London, Sage.
6. Harper, R., L. G. C. Harper, et al. (2000). "The Role and Sentencing of Women in Drug Trafficking Crime." *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 7(1).
7. Albrecht, H.-J. (1996). Drug Couriers: The Response of the German Criminal Justice System. *Drug Couriers: A New Perspective*. P. Green. London, Quartet, Dorn, T., M. Ceelan, et al. (2008). *Prevalence of drug body packing in Amsterdam, the Netherlands*. Poster presented at the European Conference of Criminology, Edinburgh. Green, P., C. Mills, et al. (1994). "The Characteristics and Sentencing of Illegal Drug Importers." *British Journal of Criminology* 34(4): 479-486. Dorn, T., M. Ceelan, et al. (2008). *Prevalence of drug body packing in Amsterdam, the Netherlands*. Poster presented at the European Conference of Criminology, Edinburgh. Beer, S. A. d., G. Spiessens, et al. (2008). "Surgery for Body Packing in the Caribbean: A Retrospective Study of 70 Patients." *World Journal of Surgery* 28.

and Nigeria.⁸ This varies according to national context: for example a large portion of drug mules in Australia are from Thailand and Vietnam.⁹ Research in the USA finds a high portion of women mules are from Jamaica and South America.¹⁰ A significant portion of women mules are single parents. Research on Colombian women mules in prison in Europe found that 85 per cent were single parents.¹¹ This is also true of women mules from Jamaica imprisoned in the UK and the USA.¹²

To an extent, these demographics can be interpreted to explain the phenomenon of drug mules. The first research on the subject, conducted by Rosa del Olmo in Venezuela, concluded that economic crisis disproportionately affected women and contributed to their entry into the international cocaine trade as mules.¹³ This hypothesis has been largely borne out in research which asks mules about their motivations. Research with female Colombian mules found that many were motivated by financial concerns connected to women's role as the head of the household.¹⁴ Likewise, research with Jamaican mules found that most women were motivated by economic need.¹⁵ Writing twenty years after Rosa del Olmo, Julia Sudbury similarly concludes that neo-liberal economic globalisation has exacerbated developing world poverty and women continue to be disproportionately affected as the financial heads of the households.¹⁶

Penny Green conducted research with Nigerian men and women imprisoned in the UK. She concludes that for both: 'relative poverty, a sense of desperation and opportunity to rise above the grinding misery of economic hardship in the developing world all contribute to a rational explanation of the phenomenon'.¹⁷ Her research with British mules found that they were motivated by similar concerns as those mules from the developing world: debt, economic distress and (in the 6 cases of 130 female couriers which she presents) 'external pressure' from older, more powerful men.¹⁸ In addition she found

that six (of the 18 couriers she interviewed) were 'the very young who see it as part of an exciting lifestyle and/or a means to another better way of life'.¹⁹

Lastly, some research has highlighted the role of coercion and threat in motivating drug mules.²⁰ This claim remains contentious as it is extremely difficult for mules to prove that they were coerced. On the other hand, there is a widespread belief that mules may 'cry wolf' in the hope of a more lenient sentence but on the other hand mules may not speak to the authorities for fear of retribution.

In sum, existing research shows that deprivation is undoubtedly an important context in mules' motivations. However, since research has tended to focus only mules from the developing world, it is hardly surprising that they should cite poverty as a motive when they find themselves imprisoned in the developed world. Furthermore, to say that people commit crime because of poverty is somewhat simplistic: it does not explain why people offend at a particular time, why one type of crime is committed over another, or why more men than women are mules, if women are disproportionately affected by economic crisis. Lastly, existing research has mostly sidelined the possibility alternative or simultaneous motives for offending. Research on women drug dealers uncovered a much wider variety of motivations than resisting poverty such as autonomy, respect, gaining a sense of control over their lives, achieving respectability as well as enjoyment.²¹ Thus the purpose of this research was to re-examine the motives of a diverse group of mules and in particular to consider what the role of poverty might be.

Methodology and participants

Data for this research was collected through 15 months of ethnographic research in women's and men's prisons in Quito, Ecuador. The researcher spent 4-5 days a week in prison with convicted drug traffickers in order to

8. Sudbury, J. (2005). 'Mules,' 'Yardies' and other folk devils: Mapping cross border imprisonment in Britain. *Global lockdown: race, gender, and the prison-industrial complex*. J. Sudbury. New York, N.Y. ; London, Routledge: xxviii, 323 p.Green (1994).
9. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), *Prisoner Characteristics: Australia*, available online: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4517.0~2009~Chapter~Prisoner+characteristics,+Australia?OpenDocument#213023132718995353992130231327189950>
10. Huling, T. (1995). "Women drug couriers: Sentencing reform needed for prisoners of war." *Criminal Justice* 9(15).
11. Dorado, M.-C. (2005). Desventajas del castigo penal 'exclusivo' a las colombianas, mensajeras de drogas en Europa [Disadvantages of the 'exclusive' penal punishment of columbian drug messengers in Europe]. *Delitos y Fronteras: Mujeres extranjeras en prisión [Crimes and Borders: Foreign women in prison]*. M. T. Martín Palomo, M. J. Miranda López and C. Vega Solís. Madrid, Editorial Complutense.
12. Sudbury (2005, see also Huling, T. (1995). "Women drug couriers: Sentencing reform needed for prisoners of war." *Criminal Justice* 9(15).
13. Olmo, R. D. (1990). "The Economic-Crisis and the Criminalization of Latin-American Women." *Social Justice-a Journal of Crime Conflict and World Order* 17(2): 40-53.
14. Dorado, *ibid*.
15. Sudbury (2005).
16. *Ibid*.
17. Green, P. (1998). *Drugs, trafficking and criminal policy: the scapegoat strategy*. Winchester, Waterside Press.. p. 18.
18. *Ibid*.
19. *Ibid*, p.93.
20. Sudbury (2005).
21. Denton, B. (2001). *Dealing: Women in the Drug Economy*. Sydney, Australia, University of New South Wales Press.

learn about their experiences from their own perspective. Ecuador is situated geographically between Colombia and Peru where most of the world's cocaine is grown.²² Although very little cocaine is grown or processed in Ecuador, it is an important point of export to the rest of the globe.²³ This is reflected in the prison population: in the women's prison 70 per cent of inmates are convicted drug offenders; in the men's prison the figure is 28 per cent.²⁴ Inmates convicted of drug trafficking came from all over South and Latin America (but especially Colombia), North America, Europe, West Africa, the Middle East, West and Eastern Europe, Russia, China and South East Asia. I interviewed over 30 traffickers, of which 23 had worked as a mule at least once (9 men and 14 women).

Not much research has been done on drug mules: they are a hidden population and most mules will not get caught. Almost all research on drug mules has been done in prison and this project is no different. It is difficult to say how representative these respondents are, nonetheless research of this type is important as it 'does show what can and does exist'.²⁵ Finally, note that mules' ages and nationalities cannot be included as it would identify them.

Motivations for working as a drugs' mule

Mules were motivated by a broad range of circumstances, pressures and desires. The remainder of the paper examines these in detail. This research finds that respondents were motivated by a wide variety of circumstances and desires along a continuum from coercion to free choice.

Threat and coercion from traffickers

Previous research has found that some mules are recruited through violent threat.²⁶ Two respondents had been recruited through threat by people that they knew nonetheless threat was not a common experience of the mules I interviewed. Marina was threatened by her ex-partner and father of her daughter. He kidnapped her daughter and gave her an ultimatum:

He came to my house and told me you will travel for me to Ecuador and you bring me that

shit [cocaine] so that you will get your daughter back. If [you do] not, you will never see her alive... I can expect anything from him: when he is saying he wanted to kill her, I will believe it. For real. (Marina, European, employed).

Marina contacted the social services, however since her ex-partner was a legal guardian they could offer little assistance. She had experienced violence from him previously and saw no choice but to do what he asked.

Similarly, Howard was threatened by the brother of an old colleague. Howard worked in the music business in the 1970's and 80's and toured with Latin bands in Colombia and had encountered people on the

peripheries of the drugs trade. Twenty years later, Howard was working in Ecuador. He was approached with an offer of mule-work. He was asked several times; each time he refused the wage increased. After Howard refused to traffic drugs several times, his contact made an excuse to come to Ecuador where Howard was visiting. Once his contact arrived, he told Howard the 'material' was on its way. They fought. Shortly after, Howard's wife received threatening phone

calls. When the drugs arrived with packaged in a suitcase, his contact had a 9mm pistol tucked into the waistband of his trousers. Although Howard's contact made no explicit verbal threat, the presence of a pistol and threats to his wife, backed up with Howard's firsthand knowledge of the drugs industry made the threat plausible:

[My wife and I] weighed up the idea of going to the police but to me, the immediate image I got was of cocaine cowboys. And gunfire and... [in the 70's and 80's] we would have to perform at the cartel headquarters and I would see all the Tommy guns and machine guns and AK-47s and everybody armed to the teeth. So... that was my mindset. That's who I think they are. (Howard, North American, self employed).

Coercion and debt

Although Howard and Marina's cases are clear examples of direct interpersonal threat, coercion through

22. UNODC (2008). World Drug Report. Vienna, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
 23. Rivera, V., Fredy (2005). Ecuador: Untangling the drug war. *Drugs and democracy in Latin America: the impact of U.S. policy*. C. Youngers and E. Rosin. Boulder, Colo. ; London, L. Rienner: xi, 414 p.
 24. Nuñez, J. and C. Gallardo (2006). Una lectura cuantativa del sistema de cárceles en Ecuador [A quantitative reading of the prison system in Ecuador]. Quito, Programa de estudios de la ciudad, FLACSO.
 25. Denton, B. (2001). *Dealing: Women in the Drug Economy*. Sydney, Australia, University of New South Wales Press. P. 18.
 26. Sudbury (2005).

debt was a more common experience. Graham was motivated to work as a mule through pressure to pay off debts to the drug traffickers who recruited him. Before working as a mule he received and sold packages of cocaine. His brother received the package, sold the drugs and spent the money. His contact demanded that the debt be paid off and asked that Graham's brother work as a mule to pay off the debts:

I wasn't forced to do it but my conscience forced me. It was either me or my brother would come down [to Ecuador] and I knew he could get killed. I made the choice that I had the better chance of returning. It was either that or seeing my nephew grow up without his father and his wife without him. I had less to risk. (Graham, North American, employed)

Graham describes how he was pressured not only by the debt, but also by his social obligations in relation to his family. Graham could have paid the debt off through selling his possessions but he decided to make the trip as it would also enable him to maintain the standard of living that he had built for himself and to have a small amount of money for the future.

Economic motives

Although a few mules worked under threat or coercion, most were motivated (at least in part) by the money that they would earn by working as a mule. This section looks at the diversity of economic motivations.

Several women mules cited providing for their family as the most important motivation, either in response to a pending crisis such as debts or as a generalised wish for their family to have better. Several respondents worked as a mule as a way to resolve pending financial crises. After losing her job and splitting up with her partner, Amanda was deep in debt which had serious consequences for her and her family:

I had to pay my rent in a week or the marshal was gonna come n padlock my door, I had nowhere to go. My mother was being evicted too so if I was gonna go live with my mum, she was gonna get kicked out also so... everybody would be in the doghouse. (Amanda, North American, unemployed).

When she agreed to work as a mule, she was paid \$2,000 in advance which she used to pay off part of her debts immediately.

Several women mules were motivated not by crises but by the opportunity to gain some improvement in the living conditions of themselves and their family:

I wanted to move, you know, I needed money and I was thinking of taking an opportunity just once to make some money, just once. I wanted to because I never did it before [...] I wanted to make for another house. I just wanted to move so that she (daughter) could have her own room. (Anika, European, full time carer).

For me, I'm not educated so like my dream was always that my children must be better than me... The first trip I got good money, I bought me a plot and I was thinking this is good cause like the money you make in 2 weeks, two months you make in 10 years. [...] It's a lot of money [...], it's a lot of money for a black woman, for a domestic worker to have that money.' (Angela, African, employed).

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Furthermore, providing for children was an important aspect of positive self-identity as a parent. Marta was unemployed when she decided to work as a mule:

Being a mother costs money and it really hurts when you can't give them what they want. Before, in a way, yeah, I could buy her toys, not everything but like when I would get paid I'd buy her some clothes or whatever and she always had what she needed. [not being able to do that] I kind of felt helpless, insecure. (Marta, African, unemployed).

These different accounts show the different meanings of providing for the family. The above quotes indicate the social circumstances in which acquiring better for the family was meaningful: unemployment, or employment in low paid labour made getting something better for one's family particularly appealing. The mules above were from a diverse set of national and social circumstances. As such, it was not poverty but rather relative deprivation that was important.²⁷ Mules were not

27. Young, J. (1999). *The exclusive society : social exclusion, crime and difference in late modernity*. London, SAGE.

motivated by the first world 'dream' but rather to have what their neighbours, colleagues and friends had.

Men's economic motives were similar to women's although they were much less likely to be motivated by providing for their family (reflecting the fact that few were parents). Echoing the above accounts, men in this research generally saw working as a mule as an opportunity to improve their living circumstances. Frank was motivated to work as a mule by:

The usual reasons, short of cash, ill health, things that I needed to redecorate my council flat etc. etc... and somebody said 'Do you want to do this?' 'Yeah. Why not? Nothing to lose.' 'We'll pay you [\$10,000] a kilo'. (Frank, European, unemployed).

Frank was living on meagre state benefits before working as a mule. He was suffering from long term ill health which meant that he was in a situation of general, long term hardship which showed little sign of improving.²⁸ Although Frank was living in the developed world, working as a mule was a way to fulfil otherwise unattainable goals. Like the women above, he aspired to a fairly average standard of living linked to his local context.

Although mules' motives were mainly tied to local circumstances and ideals, these were also shaped by conditions of globalisation. Michael (a student in his early twenties) had been involved in overland drug trafficking within and across borders in Europe before working as a mule. He first got involved in the drugs market through the party scene at his University. He first became involved in drug smuggling as a way to 'maintain his style of life'. Michael's context is important: he grew up in an Eastern European country which was emerging from its communist past. He was influenced in part by the influx of young tourists, bringing western culture and ideals with them. Unlike his parents' generation, he enjoyed an active social life that centred on travelling internationally and partying. Working as a mule enabled him to maintain this style of life independent from his parents.

Non economic motives

Mules cited a number of reasons for working as a mule that were not solely about material gain. These were

rarely primary motivations but were part of a complex mix of needs and desires. Mules' motives were usually multiple: economic need could be coupled with excitement about travel; others hoped to pay off a debt and be able to build a better future. Furthermore, as the examples above also show motives were often formed in relation to others: this was especially so where mules cited love as an important motive.

Romantic love and partnership

Love was an important aspect of some female mules' motivation.²⁹ Manuela worked as a prostitute before she met her boyfriend. He became jealous about her working as a prostitute and suggested that she work as a mule so that they could settle down together. With the money she would earn, she could gain the traditional material trappings of a traditional family and respectable femininity:

I was getting older. I wanted a man and to get married and have a good family. To have a real job and a family. [...] I was happy. Thinking that I'd found the right man and I was believing in him. (Manuela, European)

Although mules' motives were mainly tied to local circumstances and ideals, these were also shaped by conditions of globalisation.

Although demonstrating love and commitment to her boyfriend were important motives, being loved is also tied up with Manuela's desire to have a 'normal' domestic arrangement. For her (as for many other women) being single was not an attractive proposition.³⁰ In contrast to the material realities of stigma and poverty which she had already experienced in an irregular and disreputable 'job', attaining a family and upholding the normal tenets of femininity were a way to symbolically and materially improve her social status and long term prospects.³¹ Furthermore, Manuela's desire for respectability echoes the accounts by women above who wanted to achieve a respectable form of motherhood (for example, that the child should have its own room).

An alternative reading of Manuela's experience is that she was manipulated by her boyfriend. Indeed, this is how Manuela interpreted her experience when I interviewed her in prison where she was serving an 8 year sentence. Nonetheless, Manuela also remembered how happy and excited she felt when he took her to the

28. Green (1991) p. 23.

29. See also Torres, A. (2008). *Drogas, cárcel y género en Ecuador: la experiencia de mujeres mulas [Drugs, prison and gender in Ecuador: the experience of women mules]*. Quito, Ecuador, FLACSO.

30. Fraser, H. (2005). "Women, love and intimacy 'gone wrong': Fire, wind and ice." *Affilia* 20(1): 10-20.p. 16.

31. Richie, B. (1996). *Compelled to crime : the gender entrapment of battered Black women*. New York, Routledge. P. 135.

airport. Manuela's experience demonstrates that the line between free choice and coercion is a very fine one.

Travel, excitement and a free holiday

In addition to the above motives, both women and men identified a number of fringe benefits that were an additional draw although not in themselves motivations. The prospect of travel was often met with excitement, particularly for those who had no passport or had never been abroad. This was felt strongly by Catalina. She grew up under communism and had never travelled before:

It was the first time when I felt like a proper tourist, like I'd seen on the TV. Like before I was thinking how can I? I don't have money and in my country it's really hard to leave. Before I thought only business people [could travel], I never thought about young people travelling. I felt cool; dressing like a tourist, visiting different countries, speaking different languages. (Catalina, European, employed).

These findings challenge the stereotype of the third world mule motivated by financial desperation.

Discussion

This research builds on what is known about drug mules' motives. Whereas previous studies conducted in the UK and USA have tended to focus on drug mules from the developing world, the diversity of respondents encountered appears to lend support for the thesis that the profile of drug mules is more varied than in previous decades. This diversity was reflected in mules' motives. There are many more stories and much more interpretations than can be described here and unfortunately any attempt to generalise inevitably irons out much of the complexity. Nonetheless, some common themes underpinned mules' motives.

This research found that both men and women may be threatened or coerced into working as a drugs mule. These were a minority however and many mules found themselves pressured into working by debts and circumstances of deprivation. However, some mules were

not pressured, but saw working as a mule as a way to improve their material circumstances in ways which were otherwise attainable.

Like previous research, this project found that many mules were motivated by economic concerns. Due to the diversity in the group of participants, this research has had to take a complex view of poverty and its localised meanings. The data presented above shows that whilst deprivation was an important context, listening to mules' own account demonstrates that it was their sense of relative deprivation that was important. Long term deprivation itself was sometimes a motive (note for example how Frank and Anika wanted to improve their living circumstances in ways that were otherwise unattainable).

Many respondents were prompted to work as a mule by a crisis situation. It was at these times (for example when Amanda lost her job and was facing eviction) that deprivation was strongly felt as they had no resources to draw on at times of crisis. Furthermore, deprivation was strongly felt in relation to social obligations to others, particularly children. Although women often oriented their motivations towards their family (and partners), men also made decisions on the basis of collective benefit. For most respondents, working as a mule was a way to relieve debts or temporarily improve their circumstances in the short term only rather than as a long term strategy. Furthermore, although financial and economic concerns were important, it was not always the only or the most important motive: romantic love, travel and excitement were added attractions, although they were rarely the sole motivation. Indeed, excitement and travel may be an important reason for choosing to work as a mule over other kinds of deviant or criminal ways to make ends meet (for example prostitution), although these cannot be explored in depth here.

These findings challenge the stereotype of the third world mule motivated by financial desperation. Current circumstances of economic crisis across the globe may result in a wider group of people working as drug mules than previously. This remains to be seen.