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"Just Doing a Favor for a Friend": The Social Supply of Ecstasy Through Friendship Networks

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Abstract

The current project focused on the "not for profit" supply of illicit drugs within social networks. The aims of the study were to (a) explore the characteristics of social supply of ecstasy and the typical ways in which social dealing occurs, and (b) explore the benefits of social supply as perceived by those who engage in social supply. Overall, the results suggest that social supply of ecstasy occurs in dense, closely knit friendship networks and that mutual supply may be common. Users within friendship networks source ecstasy independently and concurrently supply to members of the group to ensure consistent supply of quality product and to minimize risks of health harms and criminal justice consequences. Social dealing produces little or no financial profit, yet the majority of participants in this study purchased ecstasy in amounts that expose them to significant criminal justice penalties.

Keywords

social supply, illicit drugs, ecstasy, social networks

Introduction

Social supply has been defined as "the non-commercial (or non-profit making) distribution of drugs to non-strangers" (Hough et al., 2003, p. 36), and "supplying friends where profit is not the primary motive" (Potter, 2009, p. 58). Despite limited research in this area, the social supply of illicit drugs appears to be a common practice. For example, a study of regular psychostimulant users found that on the last occasion of purchase, 58% of the sample had purchased ecstasy for other people and 71% had last obtained ecstasy from a friend or acquaintance (Sindicisg, Stafford, & Breen, 2016). Similarly, the 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) reported that 63% of past year ecstasy users acquired ecstasy from a friend or acquaintance (AIHW, 2014), while Fowler, Kinner, and Krenske (2007) found that 89% of ecstasy users first contact a friend or acquaintance when attempting to obtain ecstasy. Similar patterns of social supply have been described in marketplaces for cannabis. For example, Grigg, Lenton, Scott, and Barratt (2015) found that among a sample of 200 cannabis users, 94% reported that they had supplied cannabis to someone else at some point in their life, with the majority of those reporting that they supplied only to friends and family or only to friends and family of their

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friends. In a study of 182 young people aged 11 to 19 years in the United Kingdom, nearly a quarter never purchased cannabis, but relied on friends to provide them with the drug (Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013).

Notwithstanding some evidence that social dealers may "drift" into "real dealing" (Taylor & Potter, 2013), social dealing within friendship networks appears to reduce some of the risks for people who use drugs. For example, social networks of illicit drug distribution may protect users from direct contact with "real" dealers and the exigencies and potential risks of drug markets (Nicholas, 2008). Accessing or purchasing illicit drugs from friends rather than dealers may also facilitate a sense of respectability and security (Nicholas, 2008). Indeed, individuals who engage in "social dealing" tend to resist the label of "dealer" (Jacinto, Duterte, Sales, & Murphy, 2008; Parker, 2000). Furthermore, buying from friends is perceived to reduce the risk for both buyers (e.g., of being "ripped off") and for dealers (e.g., robbery and detection by undercover officers and informants).

Although the prevalence of social supply appears to be high within some illicit drug marketplaces (especially ecstasy and cannabis), much less is known about the social processes and social structures that facilitate the social supply of illicit drugs. Indeed, Dwyer and Moore (2009) have called attention to the neglect in drug market research of social processes and social relations that underpin marketplaces for illicit drugs. They argue that drug markets are embedded in social, cultural, and political context and that "market conditions" are driven not by the invisible economic hand of the market, but by social processes. Social network approaches have been used to explore how social networks facilitate the social dealing of illicit drugs. For example, over the last 20 years or so, social network analysis has been applied to drug distribution groups operating primarily at upper market levels (e.g., importation, manufacture, wholesale; for example, Bright & Delaney, 2013; Bright, Greenhill, Ritter, & Morselli, 2015; Bright, Hughes, & Chalmers, 2012; Morselli, 2009, 2010). These analyses have demonstrated the importance of loosely connected social networks in facilitating the operation of the entire supply chain for illicit drugs. Similarly, at lower or retail levels of illicit drug markets, social networks may represent an important vehicle for drug distribution. However, there is little research that has investigated retail level distribution especially from a social network perspective.

The Current Study

The current study aims to fill a gap in the extant literature as little is currently known about the dynamics of social supply of drugs in social networks. Social dealing will be examined from both social process and social structural perspectives facilitated by the use of social network approach. Social network approaches have been used to examine social networks and use of cannabis (e.g., Ennett et al., 2006; Kobus & Henry, 2010); cigarette smoking (e.g., Ennett et al., 2008; Ennet & Bauman, 1993; Hall & Valente, 2007; Maddox et al., 2014; Mercken et al., 2009; Mercken et al., 2010; Mercken et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 2006; Pollard et al., 2010; Seo & Huang, 2012); and use of alcohol (e.g., Deutsch et al., 2013; Meisel et al., 2015; Mundt, 2013).

The main aims of the current study were (a) to explore the characteristics of social supply of ecstasy and the typical ways in which social supply occurs, and (b) to explore the benefits of social supply as perceived by those who engage in social supply.

Method

Study Design and Participants

The project received ethics approval from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel (approval number HC11309).

Participants comprised a nonrandom self-selected sample recruited through street press advertisements, flyers on bulletin boards at the UNSW, and snowball sampling. Flyers were also provided to participants of the annual Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) study. Eligibility criteria were as follows: (a) aged 18 and above; (b) used ecstasy at least 4 times in the last 6 months; and (c) supplied ecstasy to a friend at least once in the last 6 months. The advertisement and flyers asked interested individuals to contact the first author by phone or email. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a negotiated time and location. All information was confidential, and participants were reimbursed AUD30for their time and travel expenses. Twenty-three surveys were conducted between 2013 and 2014.

Procedure

The current study used a *personal network* or *ego network* approach; such an approach is focused on the personal or social networks of each respondent referred to as "ego." The network consists of ego and individuals connected to ego and to each other (called "alters"). Participants were administrated two sets of questionnaires in face-to-face interviews (all interviews were conducted by R.S.). The first was a social network interview which mapped out the participant's network of friends. In the social network interview, each participant was asked to list (by initials only) up to 10 members of their social network who they had known for at least 1 month. Participants were asked to indicate whether each of these individuals "knew or had met" other individuals in the network. Participants also indicated which individuals in their social network used drugs, to whom they supplied drugs, and which individuals supplied drugs to them (including ecstasy and other drugs). The second questionnaire focused on ecstasy use and social supply of ecstasy. The drug use and social supply questionnaire included questions about frequency of use and social supply of ecstasy, quantity of pills purchased (typical, last, largest), cost of pills to buy and sell, whether the participants had supplied ecstasy for a group, whether the participant maintained a stockpile of drugs, and whether the participant ever gave ecstasy away for free (or on credit) or exchanged ecstasy for something else. Participants were also asked a series of open-ended questions focused on the benefits of social supply. Responses to these questions were recorded verbatim by the interviewer. All participants were asked to provide basic demographic information (gender, age, marital status, employment status, educational level). It should be noted that all results are based on self-report and therefore respondents' *perceptions* of their social networks.

Statistical Analysis

Social network metrics were calculated using E-Net, a software package specifically designed for the analysis of personal network or ego network data (Borgatti, 2006). All other analyses were conducted using the R statistical package. E-Net was used to derive the following metrics: (a) network size: the number of individuals in the network; (b) the proportion of the network who supplied drugs to ego; (c) the proportion of the network to whom ego supplied drugs; (d) the density of the network. Density was calculated without ego; that is, the proportion of ego's friends who are friends with each other. This is a measure of the constraint on ego because connections between friends means that ego's friends also supply drugs to each other and are therefore not reliant on ego.

Due to the small sample size ($n = 23$) and the fact that most variables were not normally distributed, the data were analyzed using nonparametric statistical analysis. As the study was largely exploratory, Kendall's correlations were used to identify potential associations between all variables. Following this, Wilcoxon Rank Sum Tests (Mann–Whitney) were used to analyze associations between key variables. Due to the relatively large number of tests conducted, a conservative

p value was selected ($p = .02$). As these tests were nonparametric, medians are reported. Some variables were dichotomous (i.e., a yes/no response) producing some medians that were equal to 1 (i.e., "yes").

To analyze data regarding the proportion of the social network who used drugs, the social network data were split into two categories: those networks in which 100% of individuals used drugs ($n = 15$) and those networks in which 50% to 90% of individuals used drugs ($n = 8$). In this way, we were able to compare networks in which every friend of the respondent used illicit drugs with networks in which not all friends of the respondent used illicit drugs.

The qualitative responses regarding the perceived benefits of social dealing were analyzed qualitatively by extracting the main themes that emerged from participants' responses to open-ended questions regarding the benefits of social supply (analysis conducted by D.B.).

Results

The Sample

Eighty-three percent ($n = 19$) were male with a mean age of 25.43 years (range: 18-58; $SD = 10.95$). More than half (57%, $n = 13$) of the sample was in tertiary education and 30% ($n = 7$) were employed.

Ecstasy Use and Social Supply

The entire sample had used ecstasy at some time in the previous 6 months (consistent with the selection criteria for entry to the study): 39% ($n = 9$) used ecstasy on a fortnightly basis, 30% ($n = 7$) used ecstasy monthly, 22% ($n = 5$) used ecstasy weekly, and 9% ($n = 2$) used ecstasy less frequently than monthly.

Respondents were asked to indicate the nature of their relationship with the main person from whom they obtained ecstasy in the previous 6 months. Forty-eight percent ($n = 11$) of respondents indicated that a friend was their main supplier, 35% ($n = 8$) stated that their main supplier was a dealer known to them, 13% ($n = 3$) stated that their main supplier was an acquaintance, and for 4% ($n = 1$) their main supplier was a dealer who was not known to them. Respondents were also asked about the location at which they typically obtained ecstasy. Thirty-five percent ($n = 8$) stated that they obtained ecstasy at an agreed public location, and 13% ($n = 3$) stated that they obtained ecstasy at a friend's home. Other participants named home delivery ($n = 2$), a dealer's home ($n = 2$), a rave or dance party ($n = 2$), a private party ($n = 2$), the home of an acquaintance ($n = 1$), and the street ($n = 1$) as typical locations for obtaining ecstasy. Two respondents answered "other" to this question. Seventy-eight percent ($n = 18$) of respondents stated that they had obtained ecstasy for a group of friends in the past 6 months.

Respondents were also asked about the typical, last and largest transaction sizes when they obtain ecstasy. Figures 1 and 2 show frequency histograms for the typical and largest transaction sizes reported by participants. The median for typical, last and largest transaction sizes were 3.75 pills (range: 1-50 pills), 5 pills (range: 0.5-50 pills), and 10 pills (range: 2-50 pills). Nineteen respondents provided responses to a question about typical purchase price for ecstasy. The median price was $22.50 per pill (range: $11-$30). Sixty-five percent ($n = 15$) had been given ecstasy for free.

Eighty-three percent ($n = 19$) of respondents stated that they had supplied ecstasy less frequently than weekly and 17% ($n = 4$) stated that they had supplied ecstasy once a week. Twenty-six percent ($n = 6$) of respondents stated that they had ever kept a stockpile of ecstasy. All respondents indicated that they had supplied ecstasy to friends, 39% ($n = 9$) had supplied ecstasy to acquaintances, and 9% ($n = 2$) had supplied ecstasy to strangers. Respondents were asked

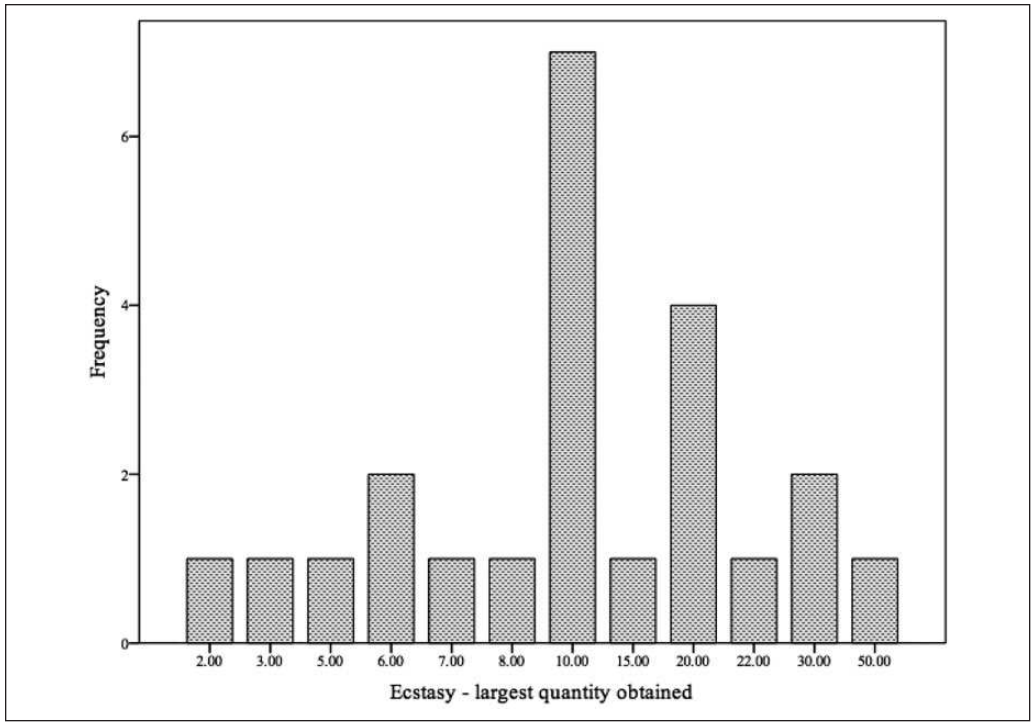

Figure 1. Frequency histogram showing transaction size—largest quantity (pills).

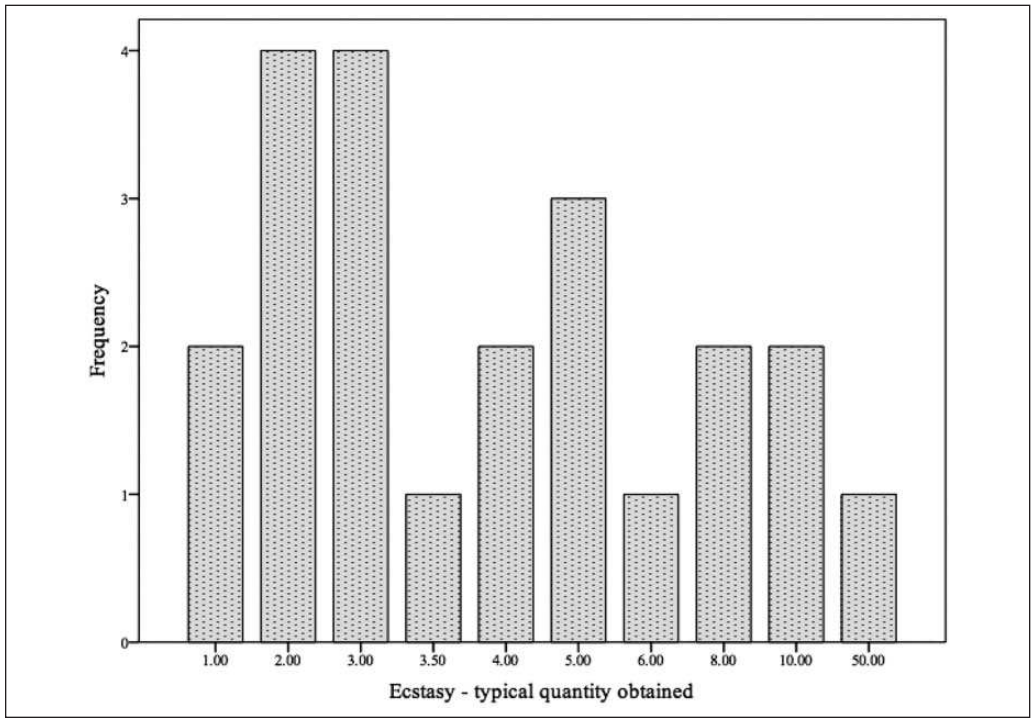

Figure 2. Frequency histogram showing transaction size—typical quantity (pills).

Table 1. Degree and Density Across the Social Networks (n = 23).

	Degree	Density
Median	8	1.0
Range	5-10	0.96-1

about the typical location at which they supplied ecstasy to others. Twenty-two percent (n = 5) named their home as the main place at which they supplied ecstasy, 17% (n = 4) named an agreed public place, and 17% (n = 4) stated that they typically supplied ecstasy at a nightclub. Respondents were also asked about the typical minimum and maximum price for which they sold ecstasy. The median minimum and maximum amount was $25.00 per pill (range: $10-$25 and $11-$35 for the minimum and maximum price, respectively). Thirteen respondents (56%) stated that they had exchanged ecstasy for something else (e.g., beer and cannabis). Fifty-seven percent (n = 11) of respondents indicated that they had given ecstasy away for free.

Social Networks

Of the 23 social networks, the average age of individuals in the social networks was 24.71 years (range: 18-43.7). The average composition of the social networks was 23.84% female (range: 0%-80%) and 76.17% male (range: 0%-100%). Across the social networks of respondents, an average of 90.50% of individuals in the networks used drugs (range: 50%-100%), an average of 48.08% (range: 0%-100%) supplied the respondent with drugs, and an average of 60.84% (range: 10%-100%) were supplied drugs by the respondent.

Table 1 shows the medians and ranges for each of the social network variables: degree and density. The metrics are reasonably homogeneous, showing very little variability across the 23 social networks. This is possibly due to the restriction on the number of individuals each respondent could name (i.e., 10), and that the majority of individuals in each network are connected to each other.

Table 2 displays the results of all statistical tests and associated p values. The median size of typical transactions for "obtained" ecstasy were larger for respondents for whom the main source of ecstasy was not part of their named social network (Mdn = 20 pills) compared with respondents whose main source of ecstasy was someone within their named social network (Mdn = 7 pills), $W = 21$, $p < .02$.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents who stated that their main source of ecstasy was a friend also stated that the source was part of their named social network (Mdn = 1). Respondents who stated their main source of ecstasy was a dealer also stated that the source was not part of their named social network (Mdn = 0), $W = 99$, $p < .01$.

Eighty percent of respondents who supplied ecstasy on credit supplied to acquaintances (Mdn = 1; that is, "yes"), while only 8% of respondents who never supplied ecstasy on credit supply to acquaintances (Mdn = 0; that is, "no"), $W = 112$, $p < .01$. Respondents who supplied ecstasy on credit supplied to a larger proportion of their social network (Mdn = 95%) compared with respondents who never supplied on credit (Mdn = 37.5%), $W = 118.5$, $p < .01$. Respondents who supplied ecstasy on credit reported a greater number of pills in their largest transaction size, compared with those who never supplied ecstasy on credit (Mdn = 20 vs. 10, respectively), $W = 109$, $p < .01$.

In social networks in which a larger proportion of respondents use drugs, the respondent supplied a larger proportion of the network with ecstasy. In social networks in which 100% of respondents used drugs, the respondents supplied a larger proportion of their social network (Mdn = 90%) compared with networks in which 50% to 90% of the respondents used drugs (Mdn = 33.3%), $W = 102$, $p < .01$.

Table 2. Results of Mann–Whitney Statistical Tests.

Variables		*p*
Main source of ecstasy is a friend	Transaction size (obtain)	.086
	Obtain for group	.052
	Main source of ecstasy is named in social network	.007**
Transaction size	Main source of ecstasy in named social network	.012*
	Obtained ecstasy for a group	.028
	Supplied ecstasy on credit	.006**
	Supplied ecstasy for free	.793
Supply ecstasy on credit (13 = yes, 10 = no)	Supply to acquaintances	.001**
	Give ecstasy away for free	.707
	Supply to named social network	.001**
	Transaction size (obtain)	.006**
	Proportion of named social network who use drugs	.024
	Exchange ecstasy for something else	.0872
Supply ecstasy for free	Stockpile ecstasy	.745
	Exchange ecstasy for something else	.056
Proportion of named social network who use drugs (100% = 15; 50-90% = 8)	Supplies to individuals in named social network (%)	.001**
	Supplied by individuals in named social network (%)	.021
Supplies ecstasy/drugs to named social network (%)	Supplies ecstasy to acquaintances	.024
	Supplies ecstasy on credit	.001**

*$p < .01$. **$p < .02$.

Benefits of Social Dealing: Qualitative Results

Respondents were asked to describe the benefits of social dealing in an open-ended question. The following four themes were extracted from respondent answers to this question:

1. *Better deal, cheaper drugs*. Some respondents made reference to cheaper prices due to established connections with suppliers or buying in bulk. For example, Respondent 1 stated that he had "an established relationship with the person I bought drugs off so I was able to get a better deal, get them cheaper." Respondent 8 made reference to bulk purchases: "If I buy more, in bulk, it's cheaper."
2. *Shared experience*. Several respondents stated that social supply facilitated a shared experience from the same batch of drugs. For example, Respondent 11 stated, "The benefits are that everyone gets the same thing and they all get on it at the same time." According to Respondent 2, "I did it for them so that they could all be on the same high." For Respondent 19, "it feels good if I provide a batch of pills, everyone having a good time together." Similarly, Respondent 22 stated, "[the benefit is to] share the fun so everyone can be part of it."
3. *Help friends minimize risks*. Respondent 5 stated that social dealing helps to "minimize the risk of my friends getting caught. I don't get nervous and I have more experience so I don't look as obvious and I'm less likely to get caught." Some respondents focused not on risks of prosecution but on health risks. For example, Respondent 16 stated, "They [friends] always end up getting crappy pills so I'm trying to help my friends out." For Respondent 21, "the benefit is that all friends have good quality stuff; buying from a stranger can be deadly." Respondent 5 stated, "For me personally the benefits are my friends being safe. I would rather buy for my friends, than them buy off a random and get a bad pill and potentially overdose."

4. Mutual supply. Some respondents identified mutual supply as a benefit of social dealing, ensuring that if they were short on drugs, someone else would be able to provide them. For example, Respondent 7 stated that he was "just doing a favor for a friend." The idea is that the friends will return the favor if and when needed, that is, if I can't get drugs for whatever reason, friends will help me out. Similarly, according to Respondent 3, "if I am unable to get pills one week, my friends are able to get them from someone else."

Discussion

Obtaining Ecstasy

This study found that more than 60% of the sample sourced ecstasy primarily from a friend or acquaintance while approximately one-third named a dealer known to them as their main source. This is in accordance with previous studies, which have found that the majority of illicit drug users obtain their drugs from friends and/or acquaintances (Fowler et al., 2007). In the current study, among those who indicated that a friend was the main source, that source was commonly named in their close social network (i.e., within their closest five to 10 friends). This suggests that when social dealing occurs within social networks, it tends to occur across strong social ties within friendship networks.

Median transaction sizes reported by participants suggested that respondents purchased ecstasy for themselves and one or more others, at least on some occasions. According to the 2015 EDRS (Sindicisg, Stafford, & Breen, 2016), regular ecstasy users consume a median of two ecstasy pills in a "typical" session and three ecstasy pills in a "heavy" session. The median typical purchase amount in the current study was four pills, and median purchase amount for the last transaction was 5 pills, while median transaction size for the largest purchase was 10 pills. These transaction sizes suggest that respondents purchased ecstasy for themselves and up to four others, depending on whether the session is "typical" or "heavy," or whether they stockpiled ecstasy. This is in accordance with the findings of Fowler et al. (2007) who found that social suppliers typically purchased five pills compared with ecstasy users who did not engage in social dealing, who typically purchased two pills. The result is also consistent with our finding that 78% of the sample had supplied ecstasy for a group of friends in the past 6 months. Furthermore, this accords with the finding that in social networks in which all friends used drugs, the respondent supplied drugs to an average of 90% of their social network.

It should be noted that some respondents purchased in much larger quantities (e.g., 20, 30, 50 pills) suggesting that some social suppliers were supplying a larger number of friends. The potential legal risks posed by social supply can be estimated by comparing the size of purchases reported by social suppliers in this study with the legislated thresholds for supply and trafficking penalties. In the Australian state of New South Wales (where this study was conducted), the trafficable amount for 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine is 0.75 g (Hughes, Ritter, Cowdery, & Phillips, 2014) with one pill approximately equivalent to 0.29 g. Based on these figures, the number of pills in a trafficable quantity is around two to three. On this basis, given the median transaction sizes report by respondents, most individuals would exceed the trafficable amount rendering them liable to serious penalties (Hughes et al., 2014). For all respondents, the largest transaction size was between two and 50 pills. For seven participants, the largest transaction size was 10 pills, four participants reported a largest transaction size of 20, two participants indicated their largest transaction size was 30, and one participant's largest transaction size was 50 pills. The threshold for an indictable supply offense is approximately 25 pills, carrying a penalty of a $220, 000 fine and 15 years imprisonment. Some participants exceeded this threshold, exposing them to risks of large fines and imprisonment.

Respondents whose main source of ecstasy was someone in their social network reported smaller typical transaction sizes (*Mdn* = 7) compared with those whose main supplier was someone outside their social network (*Mdn* = 20). This may reflect larger purchases from "dealers" who are outside the social networks of individuals who engage in social supply. It may also show that social suppliers tend to supply smaller quantities compared with "dealers" who are external to the social network of supply.

Social Supply

Although all respondents had supplied ecstasy to friends, 39% had supplied to acquaintances, and only two had supplied to strangers. Supply of ecstasy to acquaintances and strangers may represent a "drift" into real dealing (Taylor & Potter, 2013) as those engaged in social dealing start to supply to strangers in addition to friends and acquaintances. This issue requires further research to examine the extent to which this type of "drift" may occur.

With respect to financial profit, the median "buy" price for ecstasy was $22.50 (range: $11-$30) while the median "sell" price was $25 (range: $11-$35) representing little to no profit. Over half of respondents stated they had given ecstasy away for free, providing further evidence that social dealers are not motivated by profit. The minimal differential between buy and sell price suggests that social dealers do not incorporate financial compensation for risk into transactions as has been suggested for dealers and traffickers (Reuter & Kleiman, 1986). That is, user-dealers who supply ecstasy within their own social network may not be balancing risks with reward (financial profit), but against social capital profit or the social exchange value (e.g., status, likeability), they receive from others in exchange for their brokerage or supply of drugs.

Some respondents were willing to supply ecstasy to friends on credit. This again suggests that the main motivation for social dealing is something other than financial profit and may be more related to the accumulation of social capital. The use of credit in drug markets can be used to maintain interpersonal relationships and to promote loyalty (Moeller & Sandberg, 2015). Ecstasy users may give ecstasy to friends on credit as a way of accumulating social capital and to ensure consistent mutual supply.

Mutual Supply Networks

On average, the majority of individuals in the social networks of respondents used illicit drugs (average of 91%). An average of half of the individuals in the social networks of respondents supplied the respondent with ecstasy and other drugs, while an average of almost two thirds of individuals in the social networks of respondents were supplied ecstasy and other drugs by the respondent. This suggests the existence of "mutual supply networks" that facilitate the social supply of ecstasy. The qualitative responses of participants offer support for this observation. For example, one respondent stated, "the idea is that friends will return the favor . . . if I can't get drugs for whatever reason, friends will help me out." Mutual supply processes appear to facilitate consistent supply for the social network and the capacity to manage risks including risk of poor quality drugs, negative health outcomes, and detection by law enforcement.

Benefits of Dealing

Themes that emerged from an analysis of respondent responses regarding the benefits of social dealing include "better, cheaper drugs" and "minimize risks." Mutual supply also facilitates the "shared experience" of members of the friendship group. Respondents emphasized the communal experience of taking ecstasy and the "shared high" is facilitated by mutual supply across the friendship network, for example, "share the fun so everyone can be part of it"; "everyone gets the

same thing and they all get on it at the same time"; "they could all be on the same high." Results support the findings of Belackova and Vaccaro (2013) regarding the use of social supply to mitigate risks. Indeed, mutual supply may be the currency of social exchange in social networks of ecstasy users.

It is important to note that while social suppliers perceived that the benefits of dealing included lower risks (including health and social risks), the transaction sizes reported exposed the social suppliers to the possibility of very serious criminal justice sanctions including prison. Despite any benefits to users delivered by social dealing, current legislation around drug supply may render some individuals vulnerable to harsh penalties, especially due to a reliance on thresholds in drug supply legislation (Coomber & Moyle, 2014; Hughes et al., 2014; Moyle, Coomber, & Lowther, 2013). Due to these threshold-based penalties, individuals who engage in "social supply" may be penalized in the same way as dealers and traffickers who make considerable financial profit. Quantities established in threshold legislation tend to be somewhat arbitrary (Hughes et al., 2014) and are not based on consumption patterns or on the number of peers to whom a social supplier provides drugs. Individuals who engage in social dealing may be motivated by considerations other than financial profit and they may indeed make little or no profit from supplying drugs to friends. Although economic theories suggest that dealers will balance the financial rewards with the risks (measured in pecuniary terms), the not-for-profit marketplace suggests the operation of alternate processes that have not been measured in a systematic manner. User-dealers who supply ecstasy within their own social network, may not be balancing risks against financial rewards, but against the social capital or social exchange value (e.g., status, likeability) they receive from others in exchange for their brokerage or supply of drugs. The rewards or gains may be social status, connectedness, being needed, or social power. The perceived benefits of social supply were explored in the current study.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study suggest that social supply of ecstasy occurs in friendship networks and that mutual supply within such networks may be common. It appears that no single person supplies the friendship group, but that users source ecstasy independently and supply to members of the group to ensure consistent supply of quality product, and to minimize risks of health harms and criminal justice consequences. Based on buy and sell prices, social dealing produces little or no financial profit, but may facilitate the accumulation of social capital (by individuals and by the group as a whole). The majority of participants in this study purchased ecstasy in amounts that expose them to significant criminal justice penalties. Given the absence of financial motivation for social supply, the results add weight to calls for a rethinking of criminal justice penalties for individuals who engage in this type of not-for-profit social supply.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations worth mentioning. First, the sample size was small mainly due to the difficulty accessing the population of interest. This means that the analyses suffered low power; real differences may not be detected in the analyses. Second, the extent to which the results of the current study generalize to other ecstasy users and social suppliers and other social suppliers of other drugs is unknown. Third, as mentioned previously, all observations about the social networks (e.g., who knows who) are from the perspective of the respondent and may be inaccurate and/or biased. Fourth, restricting the named social network to 10 friends may limit the validity of the study. Some respondents may have had larger social networks but were not able to name all network members. Finally, it was not possible to determine whether respondents were themselves connected (this was not possible due to anonymity confidentiality of the respondent

and those "named" in the social network). Therefore, there was no way to determine the extent of duplication across social networks. This problem may be particularly acute due to the use of snowball sampling to recruit participants.

Future Research

Given the dearth of research on social dealing, the results are a call for further research in the field. The study could be replicated with a larger sample size and across different cities and regions. Similar methods could be applied to social dealing of other drugs (e.g., cannabis), and across a range of different drugs. Another line of research that may be fruitful is to examine the extent to which social networking tools (e.g., Facebook) facilitates the social supply of illicit drugs. Future research should examine brokerage and mutual supply in social networks of illicit drug users to further elucidate the social structures and dynamics involved in social dealing.

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