

Becoming an Informant

J. Mitchell Miller

Though widely acknowledged as vital to law enforcement, social scientists have largely ignored the practice of confidential informing. The extant literature on the topic is primarily comprised of experientially based practical guides to informant management and a handful of field studies drawing information from informants in the study of other undercover practices. This study features data obtained from in-depth interviews with eighty-four former informants drawn from five southern states identified through a purposive-snowball sampling strategy. Informant accounts suggest that the practice of confidential informing is an institutionalized component of a general narcotics enforcement pattern characterized by duplicity and social control irony. Confidential informant work is observed as a moral career entailing deviant identity maintenance through neutralizations and insider perspective. Narratives confirmed a motivational typology accounting for role assumption and informant-agent dynamics and orient discussion around practice and research implications.

Keywords confidential informing; informant; neutralization; moral career

The single most important way of making drug cases is the use and development of informants For drug agents, policing would be virtually impossible without informants. (Dorn, Murji, & South, 1992, p. 121)

The importance of confidential informants to detective work, especially drug enforcement, has been widely acknowledged by practitioners and researchers (Drug Enforcement Administration, 1982; Fuqua, 1978; Grieve, 1987; Lyman, 1987; Marx, 1988; Niederhoffer, 1969; Pritchard & Laxton, 1978; Skolnick, 1966;

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Williams & Guess, 1981; Wilson, 1968; Wisotsky, 1986). It is part of the traditional police lore that informants are the "sine qua non of narcotics work" (Manning, 2004, p. 147). Long considered the life-blood of good detective work, police have learned to see their possibilities for success as dependent on identifying, cultivating, working, and maintaining informants (Westley, 1956). From the prosecution point of view, "informants are almost indispensable in narcotics cases" (Harney & Cross, 1968, p. 12) as departures from mandatory sentencing minimums are often based on the provision of substantial assistance to the state (Hartley, Maddan, & Spohn, 2007).

Confidential informing centers around three applied functions: providing leads, casework facilitation, and, occasionally, testimony in court (Wilson, 1968, p. 62). From the provision of knowledge determining which criminal activities will be selected and prioritized in case selection to performing precarious undercover work, informants boost both the quantity and intensity of undercover activity. As an unknown population in terms of identity and number, the assumed presence of informants theoretically generates a degree of restrictive deterrence. Hypothetically, informants extend the reach and perceived presence of law enforcement through redirection of criminal attention to the constant possibility of undercover infiltration. Presumably, informant intervention complicates illicit transactions and disrupts the regularity of drug dealing operations (Jacobs, 1993a).

Informants also intensify enforcement operations through close association with criminal targets and entry into settings otherwise off-limits to undercover officers (Fenk, 1990; Geberth, 1979; Katsampes, 1971; Lee, 1993; Osterburg & Ward, 1992). The legal restrictions placed on informant conduct are less defined than for sworn agents and the likelihood of formal disclosure of an informant's identity is small. Accountability checks beyond the immediate supervising agents for whom they work are unlikely as well, suggesting informants have considerable autonomy in maneuvering within undercover roles to achieve deeper penetration into criminal operations with less time, legal complexity, and accountability than detectives (Brown, 2007; Jacobs, 1997; Marx, 1988).

Confidential informing is so embedded within the undercover mission that individual informants are protected at various levels of the criminal justice system (Hutchins, 2006). Identity protection is most often explained as a basic strategy on the part of law enforcement to safeguard its knowledge source and reinforce the informing system by protecting "their people" (Manning, 1977; Skolnick, 1966). In the larger picture of law enforcement as a social institution, the protection afforded informants can be understood as a by-product of a more general narcotics enforcement pattern. Vice work reproduces itself in that informants produce suspects whose arrests place them under legal pressure to also inform in order to avoid or at least lessen the effects of prosecution. All informants are thus temporary and the duration of their service is ostensibly brief, requiring constant renewal of informant pools. Should a department or even certain agents obtain a reputation within a criminal community of breaking protection or other promises (colloquially known as burning snitches), potential informants may choose to not cooperate.

The available literature on confidential informing is primarily comprised of experiential-based commentary on successful management and scholarly legal considerations regarding entrapment and the permissibility of informant-based search warrants and evidence (Harney & Cross, 1968; Lyman, 1987; Mallory, 2000; Osterberg & Ward, 1992; Palmiotto, 1984). Rooted in the spirit and ideals of the Law Enforcement Administration Assistance Act of 1968 and reflecting the fading technocratic objectives of police science, these "how-to" works no doubt inform practitioner audiences but offer little theory-methods symmetry by which to scientifically define the phenomenon, identify best practices, or recommend their generalized replication. Indeed, in his classic book on undercover policing, Marx (1988, pp. 152-158) specified the significance of informants to understanding the general enforcement pattern while lamenting the lack of comprehensive analysis. Over twenty years later, criminologists and sociologists still have not empirically examined informing per se as only a handful of studies have addressed informants at all and only when germane to other undercover functions or issues, such as identity maintenance and asset forfeiture (Jacobs, 1993a, 1993b, 1997; Miller & Selva, 1994). This study provides new information about the motivations for becoming an informant and how informants make sense of their decisions to violate the code against snitching. The results are derived from in-depth, candid interviews with confidential informants who relate firsthand how they assumed the informant role and how informing works. Given the general lack of empirical knowledge on informants, examination of the process by which people assume the role is a logical point of departure for exploration of the practice.

Background

Snitch, stool pigeon, nark, rat, fink, turncoat, traitor, squealer, and various other pejoratives reference the *confidential informant* (CI). While jargon specifying this role seems to vary across region, time, and social setting, it is important for definitional purposes to distinguish between an *informer* and an *informant*. Differences are more than mere labels for the terms denote distinct roles a citizen can assume in relation to law enforcement that differ in regard to the formality of police-citizen relationships and the extent of citizen involvement in enforcement operations.

The function of the informer is usually limited to revealing information to law enforcement authorities. Despite general public reluctance to become involved in police affairs and prevailing moral opposition to informing (street codes and "Stop Snitching" movements), the popularity of crime prevention programs (Silent Witness and Crimestoppers) suggest that ongoing cooperation is fairly normative (Pfuhl, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1989). Even in areas that promote strong anti-snitching beliefs (e.g., inner city neighborhoods) talking to police is relatively common (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, & Wright, 2003; Topalli, 2005). Opportunities to inform officials about crime have undoubtedly burgeoned with increased

utilization of electronic technologies in investigation and surveillance. Toll-free telephone and text numbers, electronic mail, and even public fax machines are widely available for citizens to turn in drug dealers, wildlife poachers, suspected burglars, and even those who litter—often for a reward.

By contrast, confidential informants are citizens who, due to various circumstances and diverse motives, assist law enforcement in an active manner (Fitzgerald, 2007; Madinger, 1999). The essential difference between an informer and an informant is that the former merely transmits information, while the latter seeks it. The CI must be actively involved in seeking out damning knowledge on suspects and sometimes developing criminal activity under the direction of the police; thus, he or she may be thought of as a “citizen-operative” or an “amateur police agent” (Wisotsky, 1986). The CI must be able to operate, either alone or in conjunction with undercover officers, within natural and fabricated criminal environments for it is the CI’s ability to do so that is of real value to the police. Not surprisingly, effective informants are often charged with or convicted of criminal offenses. In fact, a citizen’s criminal record and present extent of interaction with active criminals are the two primary variables determining whether police classify an individual as an informer or an informant. Such a classification system is important and functional because it serves to justify officers’ assumption of a morally superior and condescending attitude wherein informants are equated with criminals—a prominent theme reflective of the one-sided power dynamic between informants and police thought relevant to informant misconduct (Bloom, 2002; Schneider, 2008).

The criminal versus non-criminal classification dichotomy seems to be a widespread and longstanding law enforcement standard. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance distinguishes between criminal informants who are co-participants in criminal activity and non-criminal informants, also called sources (Janzen, 1992, p. 19). Great Britain’s National Drug Intelligence Unit differentiates between amateur informers and professional informants, the former being public-spirited individuals not always regarded as welcome and the latter, known as “participating informants,” considered the backbone of detective work (Dorn et al., 1992, p. 125). The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration categorization method specifies Class I informants as those who have criminal records and/or connections and backgrounds and Class II informants who are citizen informers.

Confidential informants enter into exchange relationships wherein their performance is compensated with various tangible and intangible rewards; favorable discretion about pending criminal charges, money, revenge, and, for some, autonomy in unlawful endeavors such as drug use, minor probation violations and even street-level drug dealing (Skolnick, 1966; U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Remuneration, regardless of type and amount, means that a law enforcement agency is contractually involved, to some degree, with a citizen. Informant work can overlap with other logistical and legal aspects of an investigation, thus requiring a structured relationship for liability as well as procedural

reasons. As Manning (2004, p. 141) notes, "the informant must stand in some formal relationship to the police officer and this relationship distinguishes citizens from informants."

Police Utilization of Informants

To get the best out of a stool, you gotta train him like you train a dog.
(Goddard, 1988, p. 187)

From the law enforcement perspective, informants are a necessary, though undesirable, element of detective work. Categorically jargoned "working" or "handling" informants, confidential informant utilization entails a threefold approach of development, management, and protection (Billingsley, Nemitz, & Bean, 2001; Mallory, 2000). Until recently, there has been little development (i.e., training) for informants or the officers overseeing them, something of a paradox given that informants are so crucial to undercover success (Dorn et al., 1992). As one British narcotics officer noted, "Drugs squads is supposed to be specialised, but there's no instructor to tell you what to do. No-one wants to know me. 'Go on. Piss off and get me some information.' And that's that" (Pritchard & Laxton, 1978, p. 21). As Manning (2004, p. 141) observes, the situation in the USA is all too similar: "Maintaining their informants—they assume this is the most fruitful way of working, in large part because they have never done anything else, have received little or no formal training."

Financing policing through forfeiture oriented undercover operations (Miller & Selva, 1994; Worrall, 2001) and litigation problems stemming from informant mismanagement (Gardiner, 2002; Marx, 1985; Natapoff, 2004, 2006, 2009; Schreiber, 2001; Williams & Guess, 1981) stimulate the development and implementation of instruction on informant utilization through positive and negative incentives, respectively (Poltilove, 2009). Informant management best practices are, in part, intended to maximize asset seizure, as evidenced by a U.S. Department of Justice endorsed booklet *Asset Forfeiture: Informants and Undercover Investigations* (Janzen, 1992; see also Bloom, 2002; Miller & Selva, 1994).

Selected terminology conditions interaction dynamics and reinforces a morally superior position in the agent-informant relationship. Language referencing informants is typically depreciating and dehumanizing (e.g., tool or rat), which reinforces that informants are to be used aggressively and that whatever negatives befall them is probably deserved because, after all, most are criminals and criminals are the enemy. Nonetheless, callous treatment of informants would appear illogical since people, even when coerced into action, typically perform better when not humiliated—a point critics have long argued:

Perhaps the biggest single weakness in the handling of informants by the American police—as far as we have seen worldwide—is police acceptance of the underworld attitude and vocabulary toward the informant. We take our informers where we get them. Many of them are unsavory characters. Some might even

be termed despicable, but these again are human beings with some natural, human reactions. Just because it appears true, they do not relish the designation stool pigeon, squealer, fink, rat or whatever similar terminology might come to the policeman's tongue in referring to the person, who, at the moment, may be his greatest ally in making his case. (Harney & Cross, 1968, p. 42)

To some extent, the labels *confidential informant* and *source* are a responsive effort to address the counter-productivity of derisive language that, as scholars of racism and feminism have noted, shapes attitudes and ultimately behavior (Boulette & Andersen, 1985; Brock-Utne, 1985). While a moral degradation approach to dealing with informants is not officially endorsed, review of law enforcement practical guides suggests it is not prohibited either. Absence of a position thus promotes a negative stance on informants within the police fraternity (Manning, 2004; Skolnick, 1966). Despite warnings that insulting language is tactless, detrimental, and simply unprofessional (Harney & Cross, 1968; Lyman, 1987), popular culture accounts of informing suggest continuation of the status quo.

At the individual level where concern is on successful undercover operations, a negative and morally superior attitude toward informants may be a direct means of casework facilitation. Just as a jockey understands that without the horse there is no race, the narcotics agent realizes the CI is often the only means to realizing enforcement objectives. Be it the case of the horse or informant, the handler, through experience, training, and occupational culture, views a high level of control as necessary to achieve favorable outcomes. An emphasis on strict, authoritative supervision is evident not only in prevailing police opinion regarding informants, but also in training manuals. Instructional police literature on proper informant management has long accentuated a power dynamic-moral superiority theme (Brown, 1985; Nugent, Leahy, & Connors, 1991; Palmiotto, 1984) as officers are versed on techniques to capitalize on informants' disadvantaged and vulnerable positions. It is reasonable to conclude that while the degradation of informants appears to serve some purposes, it also invites a range of potential problems. Exchanges of buy money and drugs with a "handling" detective, for example, may be the only interaction with a representative of the criminal justice system for many informants after initial arrest, and the unnecessary creation of resentment in a difficult to supervise worker from the onset only serves to complicate the primary challenge to effective informant utilization as defined from the police science perspective—*control*.

Police believe they can best minimize potential problems and maintain control by anticipating informant behavior and then acting preemptively, be it increased pressure or manipulation. Prediction is largely based upon the informant's motivation to assume the role in the first place. If the informant's psyche can be discerned, police believe they can maintain the upper hand by structuring exchange offers and levying pressure accordingly. After discerning motive, officers more or less attempt to outmaneuver informants in a battle of wits—a risky venture as police must deal with the informant's "home-field

advantage” wherein supervision is not always possible or strategic. Virtually, every entry on confidential informing in the police science literature emphasizes a dual theme of motivation and control that vests the prospects for case-work success in the assumption that the former informs the latter (Fenk, 1990; Geberth, 1979; Katsampes, 1971; Lee, 1993; Osterburg & Ward, 1992).

Conceptual Context

As an interpersonal and dynamic process, confidential informing is well suited for interpretation according to a microinteractionist approach. Moral careers (Becker, 1953, 1963), deviance constructionism (Adler & Adler, 2008), social control irony (Deflem, 2002; Marx, 1988;) and neutralization (Benson, 1985; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Sykes & Matza, 1957) perspectives all situate confidential informing within a general theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. The moral careers approach emphasizes distinct stages in labeling processes vital to the development of a deviant identity. *Socialization*, in which the individual learns and internalizes the norms, customs, and behaviors of “normal” society, sets the stage for *stigmatization realization*. Realization centers on awareness of consequences associated with, if not inseparable from, stigmatization as other, criminal, or drug nark. This awareness likely conditions role performance as informants weigh options across overlapping mainstream and backstage domains (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1974).

Deviance role maintenance, in a sense a layered concern for most informants who are also criminal, is informed by neutralization theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Accounts featuring an actor and context specific “vocabulary of motive” serve to neutralize wrongful acts and consequences, essentially a means of reconciling deviance as normal (Mills, 1940, p. 904; Scully & Marolla, 1984). Neutralizations and accounts for participation in crime, particularly white-collar crime (Benson, 1985; Klenowski, Copes, & Mullins, in press; Rothman & Grandosy, 1982), have been well documented and include denial of responsibility for one’s behavior (excuses), condemning the condemners and denial of injury (justifications) (Scott & Lyman, 1968). In the context of confidential informing, neutralization techniques are likely efforts to shift or transfer guilt for the betrayal inherent to informing to an external source. Collectively, these perspectives provide a conceptual context by which to assess narratives of informing across place and time and situate the practice in the broader realm of undercover enforcement.

Methods

The problems of studying sensitive areas of policing are well known and thought to be compounded within undercover contexts (Jacobs, 1993a, 1993b; Miller, 1991; Miller & Selva, 1994). The spirit of police fraternity and its “blue code of

secrecy” impede open discussion of departmental tactics with outsiders, making access a fundamental research barrier. Confidential informing, shrouded in mystique and secrecy, is an even further removed domain. Informant research is sensitive as informants occasionally cause public embarrassment for law enforcement agencies through misinformation, lies, and “double-dealing.” Informant nightmares have included CI’s planting drugs in arrestee cars, several settlements over police raids on false tips that focused on innocent citizens, and fake narcotics purchases from fictional dealers (Katel, 1995; Miller, 1991; Mount, 1991).

The research on confidential informing comes from policemen-turned-scientists who have relied on their experience, connections, and the analysis of personal case notes (Dunningham, 1994). The overriding theme in this body of works is technocracy, that is, how to better utilize informants toward optimum casework effectiveness and efficiency (e.g., Adkins, 1987; Dintino & Pagano, 1984; Harney & Cross, 1968; Janzen, 1992; Katsampes, 1971; Katz, 1990; Klienman, 1980). This atheoretical approach is unconcerned with understanding the comprehensive nature of informing and ignores the outlook, opinions, and interpretations of the principal character—the informant.

Field research, or ethnography, has proven to be an excellent means for studying a broad range of significant issues in criminology and criminal justice (Becker, 1963; Benson, 1985; Blumer, 1969; Chambliss, 1964; Copes, Hochstetler, & Williams, 2008; Denzin, 1978; Feyerabend, 1975; Fleisher, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1974; Shover, 1971, 1985; Sutherland, 1937; Tunnell, 1992). Commenting on qualitative approaches to researching crime and its control, Cromwell (1996, p. xi) contends:

Only through field research may we observe the everyday activities of offenders, how they interact with others, how they perceive the objects and events in their everyday lives, and how they perceive the sanction threat of the criminal justice system.

Sample

Eighty-four informants were identified and interviewed through a purposive-snowball sampling strategy comprised of solicited referrals from undercover narcotics officers and interviewed subjects. This subject location technique has often been used to identify participants in deviant, criminal, or esoteric activities where random sampling is not possible, primarily due to an unknown population (e.g., prostitution, burglary, and embezzlement). The recruitment of often only a very few subjects constitutes a core whose referrals and introductions start the sample “ball” rolling (McCall, 1978; Patton, 1990; Watters & Biernacki, 1989). Respondents were drawn from a five state area (Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee) over a three-year period. In-depth interviews lasting between one and three hours were conducted according to a semi-structured questionnaire and no identifiers were recorded.

Because my goal was to quickly build as large a sample of informants as possible, an effort was made to interview most referrals. Four screening criteria were used, however, to increase the chances of obtaining quality data. All of the subjects in this study: (1) were former or idle narcotics informants at the time of interview, (2) had participated in at least three cases, (3) had worked as an informant within the last three years, and (4) were willing to read (or listen to) and then sign an informed consent form. Regarding the sample, all but three were male, the average age was thirty-one, and about half were repeat drug crime offenders. Sixty-three respondents were Caucasian, seventeen were African-American, three were Hispanic, and one claimed native American ethnicity. Additional descriptive characteristics were not recorded in furtherance of confidentiality and no follow-up contact was made as these data collection meetings were all one time interactions.

While observing confidential informing as an erratic and fluid stepwise process involving initial entry, informant service, and then withdrawal, the findings presented below focus on the initial stage of role assumption and underlying motives. Presumably, the latter conditions the likelihood of problems, casework success, and length of service rendered the police. The decision to cooperate is not monolithic as the reasons for initial entry and continued service vary, as demonstrated through a motivational typology allowing closer examination of the transition process specific to becoming an informant.

Findings

Entering the Informant Role

Almost all informants initially assumed the position following their arrest for a drug offense. Most were petty to mid-level drug dealers, but some mere users were sucked into reverse stings and then informant service. Many "cut the deal" to cooperate even before posting bond. While the respondents' explanation of their gateway into informing featured processual commonalities, the nature of initial entry varied according to the circumstances surrounding arrest, personal position, and prior involvement with the criminal justice system.

The decision to become an informant did not entail lengthy deliberation for those self-described as naive dealers arrested for the first time. Not knowing what would happen next, agreeing to become an informant provided temporary relief from the intense stress associated with being busted and the fear of immediate incarceration. One of the younger ex-informants I interviewed recalled the decision to "flip" after his arrest: "I didn't really want to do it (inform), but at the time getting out of trouble was all I could think of—guilt or shame wasn't something I thought about much until it was over." His experience was echoed in another interview, "I wasn't very cool and acted desperate because I thought I was headed for jail. I offered to do what they wanted and just kept saying I didn't want to go to jail." Often fear-driven, agreeing to informant service can

be little more than an uninformed lunge at a perceived escape route as indicated by one former assistance provider:

I didn't really understand what was involved when I agreed. They said cooperate to help myself and at the time I thought all I would have to do is give them information. It (the arrest) was a bad dream and agreeing (to become an informant) was the only way to make it end. Mostly, I wanted to just get out of there and go home.

The subjects reported that police usually employed scare tactics oriented toward receiving a quick commitment to cooperate prior to the chance to make bail and be released. Some reported threats of prison time that, though exaggerated and excessive for the drug crimes for which they were, or might have been, charged, effected capitulation. Others received conditional promises that their seized property, cars more often than currency, might be returned if they "did the right thing." The phrase "do the right thing" was reported by a majority of the interviewed informants throughout the five states, reinforcing the previously discussed moral authority theme.

But moral duplicity seemingly emerged just as early in many informants' experience. In response to voiced reluctance to cooperate, detectives spoke of jail and prison horrors that essentially terrorized some arrestees into assuming the informant role. For young, white, and middle class dealers whose perceptions of incarceration seemed based on television and sensational prison movies, graphic warnings of daily violence and prison sodomy produced the desired agreement. Some arrestees were familiar with such tactics from previous experience or associates and did not automatically agree to cooperate, instead they held out for some assurance of leniency.

Leniency from either real or impending criminal charges was stated as the overwhelming reason for initial entry by most respondents. However, fear of incarceration was not always their primary or only concern. Some informants have a general sense of the penalties that might be levied against them. If arrested for the first time or with small quantities of an illicit substance, they realized jail time was unlikely but often cooperated for a variety of other legal duress reasons.

One informant who sold quarter ounces of marijuana at his workplace to support his own use assumed the role to avoid being formally charged for fear that he would be fired. His cooperation was secured when an officer allegedly threatened to place a call to his supervisor. Another respondent was a college student who, ironically, aspired to go to law school and knew that a criminal conviction would dramatically lessen chances of acceptance. For others the choice to become an informant was an effort to prevent family and friends from learning of their arrest and thus avoid embarrassment.

Although agreeing to assume the role appeared to be a snap decision for most, others claimed to have calculated various contingencies prior to arrest. Less easily manipulated than first timers and knowing there was not any real doubt as to whether they would cooperate, repeat informants sometimes

engaged the cooperation agreement session in a businesslike manner. Those arrested previously knew what to expect and, even though their past records were used by detectives as leverage, related the importance of staying "calm and collected." As one participant explained:

It was the last place on earth I wanted to be, but I wasn't rattled. I listened to their threats and said I'd cooperate. I just wanted to go home and already knew I'd have my lawyer present or aware of anything formal.

For most first time informants, police attempt to secure their cooperation through the widely rumored game of "good cop, bad cop." In this ruse, two or more officers are threatening and degrading, while another, the hopeful informant handler, appears less hostile and sympathetic to the potential informant's unfortunate situation. As most eventually agree to cooperate anyway, some older informants thought this charade was primarily performed to set the stage for casework. The idea was to expedite the informant-agent relationship by having the friendly cop become the informant's handler. The message is clear, "It is okay to trust me, I'll take care of you."

While several ex-informants admitted that such plays initially deceived them, as they became more seasoned drug dealers (and thus repeat informants) they responded with games of their own. Some prospective informants continued to attempt to manipulate the circumstances surrounding entry to the role with the same hustling mentality that characterized their approach to drug dealing. For example, some claimed to invoke a "schoolboy image" with some success. As a part-time student preoccupied with campus marijuana dealing, one subject recalled his performance:

I wanted them to see me as a college kid that made some bad choices, you know, got mixed up with the wrong people and things. My (supplier) told me how to act if I ever got popped because college kids are worth helping and street dealers don't get any breaks. It's not that hard-core types don't inform as much—they just get screwed harder after, so I was very apologetic and respectful. Most of all I pretended to be real embarrassed.

So, while police immediately stage interaction dynamics toward casework, CI's attempt to manipulate, through symbolic expression, for leniency just as quickly. Another prior dealer, arrested for the second time and still on probation, played the clean cut all-American image to its extreme during the "flip" session to invoke sympathy.

I knew this time I was in deep shit, more because of being on probation than the weight (of cocaine purchased from an undercover detective). So I *made* myself sit there and cry and acted hysterical, like I might kill myself or something. I talked about being kicked out of school, losing my girlfriend, and being disowned by my family. Jail was what really scared me but I never mentioned it—didn't want to even raise that possibility. Most of them (the detectives) were indifferent and kind of laughed at me, but one younger guy finally sat down and

told me it could all work out. He was the one I ended up working for After it was all over, I think he knew I had scammed him.

A Confidential Informant Motivational Typology

Following police science observations of motive as the determining factor influencing confidential informing, each respondent's primary motive for providing assistance was queried and four motive types were identified: the hammered informant, the mercenary informant, the vengeful informant, and the police buff. These are discussed below in order of descending representation in the sample.

The most common types of informant are those who are "hammered" into compliance. These informants are "turned" or "flipped" after their arrest and agree to become informants due to legal duress. The pending criminal charge is used first as leverage to force a person to cooperate and then to perform once in the informant role as Goddard (1988, p. 195) has explained:

Soon as you flip somebody, make him call his contact, even if they only talk about the weather, because the minute a stool sees you record the conversation and put that cassette in your pocket with his conversation on it, he knows you've got *him* in your pocket. Never fails. You got physical proof of the guy's treachery, and you've bought him with that. He's *yours*.

The second most common types are mercenary informants. These informants are a type of bounty hunter motivated by money, which, according to informants, police view as greed rather than paid assistance. The mercenary informant usually works on a contingency fee basis, a situation that can be promising and problematic. Because informants do not realize any profit unless casework is successful, greater effort in planning and participating in undercover operations may result. The desire for money, however, can take a backseat to legal restrictions and departmental policies and prompt the informant to fabricate situations, give false testimony, or even plant evidence to ensure that a case is "successful." Whereas the hammered informant is spurred into action by negative motivation, mercenary snitches are positively motivated.

Vengeful informants offer to cooperate to realize revenge against other citizens in countless circumstances. Inequitable drug deals, reactions to rumors that the target tried to snitch on a friend, scorned partners in intimate relationships, and competition elimination are but a few of the more typical situations that motivate revenge seeking informants. In general, respondents voiced a "fair play" argument in reference to targeting dealers and, especially, other known informants.

Police buffs represent the final motivational category. Eccentric citizens and police fans often attempt to serve as informants. While they may have useful information on occasion, they are not as strongly motivated as flipped or mercenary informants and thus less valuable. The main reason is that this

type of informant is usually not submerged in drug or other criminal subcultures. Police buffs and vengeful informants, if used at all, are usually involved for a specific case but not in a continuing capacity. If persistent in their desire to assist, these types of informants are generally considered a nuisance. A lack of communication and indifference by agents suggested that, though previously in an active hammered role, they were no longer taken seriously due to type shift.

Accounts and Neutralizations

For most informants, regardless of motivation, assuming the role of informant produces a double stigma. First subjected to the moral degradation ceremony, labeling, and treatment as criminal by the police, informants must also reconcile the self stigmatization that comes from the betrayal and treachery inseparable from the role. In an effort to gain psychological relief, they employ "techniques of neutralization" (Benson, 1985; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Informants are variably committed to drug subcultures and experience guilt or shame when they agree to snitch, the most serious of all drug subculture infractions. Many contrived rationalizations and justifications for their acts in order to alleviate responsibility including speculation that those they had set up would simply pass the buck through additional informant service in a sort of paying it forward logic wherein no one would really suffer legal or social penalties or that they would have refused to cooperate if their family was not dependent upon them (Topalli, 2005).

Rationalizations were voiced in justificatory tones and ranged from stories of bizarre sets of circumstances producing dire financial need and peer pressure to most commonly, drug addiction. Informants were typically uncertain whether they were technically drug dependent at their time of arrest, but several related that most of their dealing earnings supported drug habits. Others dealt for the easy money and lifestyle and a few insisted they rarely or never sold drugs. Realizing the futility of a professed innocence approach, most attempt to shift the responsibility for their crimes and informant service to addiction or situational pressures, neutralizing their behavior with a rationalization of "it wasn't really me, but the drugs acting."

Once informants decide to feign drug addiction, they may attempt to exploit others' altruistic desires in order to minimize their legal trouble, as one respondent explained:

I was addicted somewhat, I guess, but I wasn't a coke fiend or anything. I got a lawyer to negotiate the informing stuff and he also lined up an outpatient substance abuse program for me. I went, like, six times for \$125 a visit and the counselor wrote a letter on my behalf to the judge. I think it made me look like a responsible person and helped. It was kind of like I bought the letter because showing up with the money was all that was required.

Although many informants tried to transfer responsibility for their actions, it usually made little difference in the treatment received from undercover officers, especially in regard to drug addiction. In one botched attempt, the offered account was readily dismissed:

Trying to play my dealing off on addiction didn't work at all. I thought they (the drug squad) would have sympathy if they thought I was strung out. The Sergeant told me "the only thing you are addicted to is money."

Unable to run a scam on the police, many, consistent with the neutralization perspective, engaged in a condemnation of the condemners. Police hypocrisy was a general theme across interviews and ranged from allegations of stolen buy money recorded as allocated to informants to comparisons of informants' (moderate) drug use and officers' (raging) alcoholism. It is important to distinguish between the factors motivating initial entry and the reasons for continued service. This study reinforces the general assertion in the informing literature that most are forced into service. For the vast majority, informing is indeed an unpleasant, but necessary situation to be dealt with and presumably ended as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Confidential informing is full of moral ambiguity and duplicity. Most of the informants I interviewed had negative if not insulting views concerning law enforcement. Prior to their arrests, almost all had sworn to never snitch but when push came to shove, they capitulated. Informants are despised because they betray others; yet detectives reportedly attempt to deceive informants anyway they can to secure their cooperation. Whereas informants more often than not seek to target strangers, narcotics agents routinely feign friendship with suspects and their informants who are both fearful of and dependent upon them. It is ironic that detectives exploit and betray their CIs given that it is this same moral offense that marks them inferior by the standards of the police fraternity. It would appear that the general law enforcement orientation to informing contributes to informant misconduct problems and should be a major focus of future applied research.

Observation of confidential informing as a moral career life-course informs additional research opportunities. Only the initial entry stage was analyzed here; the subsequent stages of casework and desistance give rise to numerous research questions. Still to be addressed are the central issues of what informants actually do in the role to facilitate casework, the degree of their influence, and why they withdraw from the role. Examination of casework is needed to empirically examine allegations that informants more so than agents affect case selection and prioritization. The aggregate effect of substantial assistance on the system in terms of prison population reduction attributable to sentencing

departures and the general deterrence effect of informing are additional consequential applied criminological issues. The mistreatment of informants is likely related to role desistance but, *sans* empirical scrutiny, is unknown.

This study provided empirical insight into the phenomenon of becoming a confidential informant based on firsthand insider data. Systematic evidence was generated in support of a motivational typology that, while enriching the informant knowledge base, raises questions for practice. Specifying motivation for the purposes of gaining control and predicting informant behavior is a long-standing but problematic and risky approach to undercover work. The plurality of motives reflects the diversity of human behavior that, in the context of drugs and legal duress, is apt to be self-serving and erratic. Rather than engage a game defined by control and manipulation played out through informant-agent dynamics, informing might prove more effective if driven by evidence-based guidelines augmenting a uniform, less discretionary orientation to a clandestine and still largely unexplored phenomenon.

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