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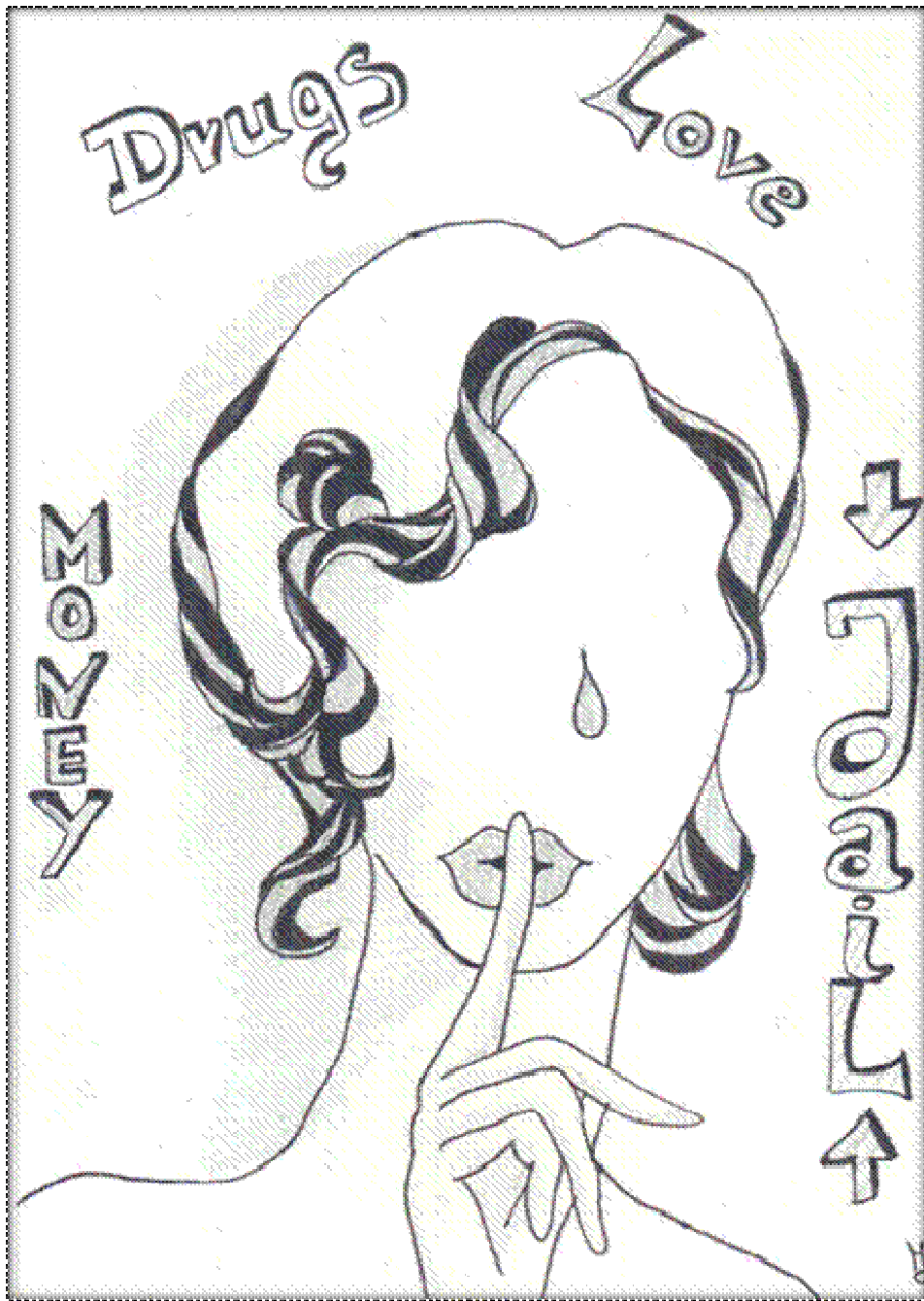
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**Women in the international cocaine trade:  
Gender, choice and agency in context**

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2009



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## Abstract

This thesis is about women in the international cocaine trade and in particular about their experiences as drug mules. This is the first comprehensive qualitative investigation based on the accounts of women and men who worked as drug mules and those who organise and manage trafficking cocaine by mule across international borders.

Two explanations for women's involvement in drug trafficking compete. The 'feminisation of poverty' thesis contends that women's participation in the drug trade results from (and is a response to) their economic and social subordination. The 'emancipation thesis' contends that women's participation in the drugs trade is an effect of women's liberation. This thesis explores if and how women's involvement in the drug trafficking (recruitment and 'work') is shaped by their gender.

I interviewed 37 men and women drug traffickers imprisoned in Quito, Ecuador. This location was chosen due to the high numbers of women and men imprisoned for drug trafficking crimes. Respondents came from all levels of the drug trade and from different parts of the world. Data was collected and analysed using narrative analysis to understand the way in which discourses of victimhood were created in prison. This allowed for a sensitive interpretation of the meaning of victimhood and agency in respondents' responses.

The substantive section of the thesis examines two aspects of women's involvement in drug trafficking in depth. The first section examines aspects of women's recruitment into the drug trade as mules; the second section examines the work that mules do. This research finds that women's participation in the international cocaine trade cannot be adequately understood through the lens of either victimisation or volition. The contexts in which men and women chose to work as a mule were diverse reflecting their varied backgrounds (nationality, age, experience, employment status, as well as gender). Furthermore, mules' motivations reflected not only volition but also coercion and sometimes threat of violence. Although gender was a part of the context in which respondents became involved in mule-work, it was not the only, or the most important aspect. Secondly, this research examined the nature of mule-work. Most mules (men and women) willingly entered a verbal contract to work as a drugs mule; nonetheless the context of 'mule-work' is inherently restrictive. Mules were subject to surveillance and management by their 'contacts' had few opportunities to have control or choice over their work. Collaboration, resistance and threat were often played out according to gendered roles and relationships but gender was not a determining factor. Nonetheless, respondents could and did find ways to negotiate resist and take action in diverse and creative ways.

Prior research on the cocaine trade has ignored the importance of women's participation or has considered it only in limited ways driven by gender stereotypes. Thus, this research addresses a significant gap in available evidence on women in the drug trade. This research also contributes to contemporary debates in theories of women's offending which have centred on the role of victimisation and agency in relation to women's offending.

## Introduction to the thesis

The illicit drug trade has a long and international history bound up with colonialism, politics and war. The last twenty-five years have seen a rapid growth of trade in cocaine. This development has profoundly affected local, national and international markets, law enforcement and policy and which has produced cooperation and conflict.

The majority of research on the drug trade has focussed on the political and economic macro-structures and effects. Despite the visibility of drug traffickers as folk heroes and devils in politics and popular culture, little is known about drug traffickers and even less about the role of women in the drug trade. Nonetheless, a handful of reports show a steady increase in the number of women arrested for drug trafficking offences worldwide. Women's participation in drug trafficking is now acknowledged as significant.

The void of knowledge about traffickers and particularly about female traffickers is too frequently filled by myth, political rhetoric and popular stereotypes. The image of the evil trafficker has become a powerful discursive cue in global and international discourses surrounding international law enforcement, policy and trade. Now, accompanying the dark (male) figure of the international criminal is that of the drugs 'mule', feminised, naïve, dominated and exploited: whether as a young, pretty, blue eyed white girl fooled by her (evil trafficker) boyfriend, or her southern sister forced into trafficking by poverty. Such images parallel the historically persistent image of the female drug user as victim: naïve and exploited; victimised by both men and drugs.

This thesis aims to 'build an alternative, critical understanding' (Bourgois 2003: 12) of this phenomenon: one informed by women's experiences rather than stereotypes and which seeks to explore women's experiences as both agents and victims. This research is feminist in ontology, theory and method. It aims to make women 'sociologically visible' (Stanley and Wise 1993) in an area where women's participation is downplayed, misunderstood and misrepresented.

This thesis explores the experiences of women in the drug trade by interviewing imprisoned drug traffickers in Ecuador. I interviewed women and men from different aspects of the drug trade. Nonetheless this thesis is focussed on women drug mules. Although a larger study of the role of women in the international drug trade is long overdue, this thesis focuses on women in the most 'victimised' role in the drug trade: as drugs mules.

## Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 describes the two main ways in which drug trafficking has been conceived: as an ‘alien threat’ in Reagan’s ‘War on Drugs’ and as an international economic enterprise. I then show that both these paradigms contain deep androcentric assumptions which have left little space to ‘see’ women in the drug trade beyond gender stereotypical roles. This has led to the exclusion of women from research on drug trafficking and gender blindness. Furthermore research on women and drug trafficking has often conflated the categories of mule and women, inadvertently perpetuating traditional binary conceptions of gender: masculine as active, female as passive. I contend that in order to ‘see’ women in the drug trade, this research must view drug trafficking as a global-social phenomenon to avoid inheriting gendered stereotypes and bias.

Chapter 2 reviews the available literature on women in the drug trade. Limited research shows that women are undoubtedly present in all levels of the drug trade. Available qualitative research falls into two dominant theoretical camps which are underpinned by the two dominant paradigms described in chapter 1. In the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis women are seen to get involved in drug trafficking as a response to victimisation: either through poverty, or directly by a trafficker/boyfriend. Next, the emancipation thesis contends that women’s involvement in the drug trade is a result of women’s emancipation in the licit world. I conclude that neither of these theses provides adequate theoretical space to properly ‘see’ women’s agency in the context of the drug trade.

Chapter 3 proposes that women’s involvement in drug trafficking must be theorised differently to be able to ‘see’ women’s agency. I contend that the structured action approach may be useful. I describe James Messerschmidt’s version of the structured action approach, then Jody Miller’s critique and reconceptualisation of theory which she sees necessary to avoid reifying gender thereby producing distorted interpretations of women’s participation in crime. Lastly I show how Miller’s manifesto relates to this thesis.

Chapter 4 describes and contextualises the research and the research setting: prisons in Ecuador. I first contextualise prisons in the contexts of the ‘War on Drugs’ and as a ‘hub’ in drug trafficking networks. Next I describe prisons as a narrative landscape which shapes women’s constructions and understandings of their careers as drug traffickers, as imprisoned women, as victims of gender, poverty and love and as decision making agents. This lays the groundwork for understanding and interpreting women’s and men’s accounts of their involvement in drug trafficking.

Chapter 5 builds on the description of prisons provided in the previous chapter and described how data was collected using ethnographic immersion and interviews. I examine what kinds of data could be collected and how data was analysed.

In the second part of this thesis, I present the findings of the research. Chapters 6-8 examine how women get involved in drug trafficking. Chapters 9 and 10 examine women's experiences working as a mule.

In chapter 6, I examine how women became involved in drug trafficking networks. Although drug trafficking is often assumed to be organised along ethnic or national connections, this was not a finding of this research. Women usually became involved in drug trafficking networks through a family friend, romantic partner, acquaintance, a friend who was a successful mule, or rarely a 'cold call' from someone they did not know. There was some overlap in how men and women became involved in drug trafficking. Gender was a part of the picture of women's recruitment but was not an explanatory factor.

In chapter 7, I examine women's motives for getting involved in mule-work. Contemporary research has described women as driven into working as a mule by poverty. In contrast, this research finds that mules' motives were diverse, sometimes contradictory and reflected the heterogeneity of mules' backgrounds, experiences, nationalities, gender roles and expectations. Furthermore these motives were shaped by narrative conventions in prison. Thus, I offer a critical reading of motives which reveals them to be multiple and contradictory. Although economic motives were commonly cited, these were often not the only important motive for involvement. Love for family and romantic love for partners was also important. Furthermore, some women became involved in drug trafficking in the hope of economic betterment rather than simply as an escape from poverty. I also consider secondary attractions to working as a mule such as the opportunity to holiday abroad.

In chapter 8, I examine how respondents made a decision to work as a mule. This chapter highlights the importance of context for providing meaning for getting involved. I conclude that women were often engaged in a 'connected' decision making. Women made their decision with others in mind and in connection with other people. However, none could be said to have made a rational choice based on objective or unbiased information. This was not only true of women mules, but of men mules also. This raises important issues about the extent to which mules gave informed consent.

Chapters 9 and 10 examine the work of a drugs mule. Mules' accounts demonstrated that they have little control over their work. This finding was echoed by contacts who explained that mules were heavily minded to limit the liability of their stealing the drugs. Mules are subject to a 'verbal contract' which is enforced in a variety of means: both

explicitly and implicitly. Many mules participated in fulfilling their verbal contract of work and considered their participation to be voluntary. However, when other mules attempted to back out, they found that they often had no choice but to complete the job. Although mules could sometimes negotiate control over how they completed their work as a mule, backing out was almost impossible.

In sum, this thesis explores the question of whether women drug mules are victims or agents in depth. It explores what gender and victimisation/volition are in context, the relationship between them and shows that understanding women's recruitment and participation in the drug trade as mules demands seeing beyond binary constructions such as victimisation and volition. Understanding how gender, victimisation and agency are constituted in the context of the drugs trade does much to clarify the relationship between gender and victimisation. Lastly, I conclude that although women's participation in the drug trade as mules is important, women are also present in the drug trade in a variety of 'hidden roles'. There is considerable scope for an exploration of women in the drug trade more widely in the future.



# CHAPTER 1: DRUG TRAFFICKING, WOMEN, MYTH AND MISONCEPTION

‘Traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or agents of knowledge’ (Harding 1987 cited by Bosworth 1999: 71).

## **Introduction**

This chapter opens the thesis by reviewing and critiquing existing approaches to researching drug trafficking and drug traffickers. In particular it will explore and seek to explain the dearth of research on women traffickers and expose the gender-blindness which characterises contemporary conceptions of drug trafficking. Understanding and examining the gendered biases that underpin the majority of research and writing on drug trafficking is important to avoid unwittingly perpetuating them in my research. Next, I examine what is known about women in the drug trade. I will show that available data demonstrates that women are present in a wide variety of aspects of the drug trade. Lastly, I propose that approaching drug trafficking as a global social phenomenon may be a useful way to avoid the kinds of gender bias which prevail.

## **Context of investigation: the cocaine trade**

The cocaine trade, the subject and context of this research is a phenomenon which spans continents and which is in constant flux; its operations are hidden, rarely recorded and characterised by secrecy (Dorn et al. 1992: 201). Furthermore, ‘Data available on illegal drug production, distribution and use is notoriously difficult to gather with any accuracy of consistency’ (IDCP 2007: 1). Thus, any ‘objective’ description of the phenomenon is impossible.

As a result ‘trafficking can be portrayed in a variety of ways, depending on the techniques and interests of those accredited to speak on the subject: the enforcement agencies, media, politicians and sometimes, criminologists.’ (Dorn, et al. 1992: 201). Following attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, the link between drug trafficking, organised crime and terrorism has emerged as an important new research agenda (Levi 2007; Wright 2006). In the UK, SOCA explicitly groups together immigration crime, trafficking in people and trafficking in arms and drugs (SOCA 2006b). Clearly, the intensity and nature of the threat posed by drug trafficking can

be played up or down, or skewed according to current political climates and/or budget restraints (Dorn et al. 1992: 201).

In spite of these caveats, research and writing on the international cocaine trade all too often plays the ‘number game’ (Thoumi 2005). Most rely on a single figure which values the industry at some hundreds of billions of dollars to concretely confirm its size and importance. Such figures carry an air of scientific neutrality that belies the biases and politics that permeate research on drug trafficking.

Since I agree with Thoumi’s criticism (and later critique approaching the drug trade as an economic enterprise), I only need re-state here what is undisputable: the cocaine trade is significant in size, range and effects. Cocaine can now be found in most industrialised nations and in many developing ones (UNODC 2007). Despite efforts to curb the growth and export/import of cocaine internationally, all available data suggests that the cocaine trade remains buoyant (Barham, et al. 2003; Coomber 2006; UNODC 2007). It is a category of crime which is treated as extremely serious in all parts of the world. The penalties for those caught trafficking drugs include life sentences and the death penalty: punishments previously reserved for violent and dangerous offenders (Lines 2007; UNODC 2007; UNODC 2008). Governments worldwide have invested great quantities of resources aiming to halt the flow of drugs. In the United Kingdom the annual budget for 2006/7 for the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) was provisionally set at over £400 million (SOCA 2008a).

Findlay reminds us that the current buoyancy of the international drug trade is a result of prohibition: ‘without criminalisation, the profit motive behind drug trafficking would not be insured’; without prohibition there is no illicit drug trade and there are no traffickers (Findlay 1999: 103).

### **Crime’s metaphors; imagining drug trafficking**

‘Crime does not exist; crime is created. First there are acts. Then follows a long process of giving meaning to the acts’ (Christie 1994: 21).

The way in which the cocaine trade has been discursively constructed has consequences for how it is studied.

‘As science fiction has been so influential in shaping our visions of alternative worlds and distant galaxies, so crime fiction, television and film mould our perspectives of the serious end of the crime spectrum’ (Hobbs 1995: 1).

Due to the unknowable nature of the drug trafficking trade, it has been described using ‘borrowed’ metaphors. Two are prevalent: the first has its roots in the 1980’s Reaganite ‘War on Drugs’ discourse; the second is more recent and sees the drugs industry as an economic enterprise. These will now be discussed with attention to the ways in which they implicitly and explicitly gender the drug trade and those who work in it.

### **Reagan’s war on drugs: the creation of ‘suitable enemy’**

Whilst stereotypes of the ‘drug pusher’ as (macho) alien threat can be traced back to the 1920’s image of the ‘peddler’ in the USA and even further back in connection with the opium wars (Coomber 2006: 20), contemporary conceptions of the ‘drug trafficker’ were crystallised in their current form in the 1980’s when Reagan declared ‘War on Drugs’ (Coomber 2006, Green 1998, Olmo 1996, Sudbury 2002). According to Olmo ‘discourses corresponding to specific economic and political interests have masked the true nature and dynamic of the drug issue by casting it in semi-mythical terms’ (1993: 1).

Reagan’s ‘War on Drugs’ defined the threat posed by cocaine as ‘an urgent matter of national security’ (Olmo 1996: 33). The ‘war’ was directed both discursively and literally against an ‘external enemy’ or ‘alien threat’ (Hobbs 1998). This shaped political anti-drug discourse both in America (Olmo 1996: 36) the UK and the rest of the world (Sudbury: 2002: 65). The French blame the Russians; the British blame everyone from ‘the threat in the East’ to the Jamaicans, Chinese, Colombians, Turks and Italians (Hobbs 1998: 407-8)<sup>1</sup>. Green contends that ‘blaming ethnic minorities is central to western strategies of drug control’ (1998: 16-17). This is not confined to Western Europe and North America but is replicated around the world. In Argentina, influx of heroin was attributed to Turkish immigrants (Rossi 2007) as it is in Germany (Albrecht 1996). In Ecuador, drug problems are universally externalised as the ‘Colombian problem’ (Torres 2006).

Furthermore, Reaganite drug war discourse linked drug trafficking with other forms of (‘foreign’) organised crime: in particular it drew on the existing concept of foreign Mafias (Russian and American), the Italian Cosa Nostra, Chinese Triads and Colombian Cartels (Green 1998: 17, see also (Reydburd 1994)). Linking drug trafficking to organised crime inherited the image of organised crime: top-down, organised, secretive and threatening. Similarly, the image of the drug trafficker played on those of the Mafioso: hyper masculine, organised, violent and ruthless:

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbs reports that only the Italians viewed the phenomenon of organised crime as home grown. (1998: 408).

‘One of the linguistic legacies of the 1980’s was the transformation of the ‘drug trafficker’ into an ideological cue, a shorthand reference encompassing the menace, evil, greed, depravity and corruption (moral financial and political) required to ease the passage of repressive anti-drug legislation and policies’ (Green 1998: 78).

The ‘War on Drugs’ needed a suitable enemy. Portraying traffickers in this way justified (morally and practically) a response to the threat of drugs that was similarly armed, militarised, centralised and secretive. The characterisation of the drug trafficker as foreign, armed, organised and hyper-masculine have prevailed partly due to their political power and ‘discursive usefulness’ (Findlay 1999: 50). Desroches notes that depicting drug trafficking as ‘organised crime’ in this way ‘has long been popular with journalists, law enforcement, some academics and has been endorsed by several governmental investigations and enquiries.’ (2005: 35). Although recently there has been a renewed move to making users responsible for the drug trade (Costa 2008), the stereotype of the drug trafficker as drug pusher extraordinaire persists. Furthermore, although drug trafficking is recognised as not particularly organised (Dorn, et al. 2005; Reuter 1983), the image of the drug trade as organised, militarised and centralised remains.

### **War on Drugs: women mules as subcategory**

‘The metaphor of the ‘war’ against crime is one of the most notorious in criminology and criminal justice policy: as a militaristic metaphor it effectively eclipses certain areas of discussion and rules out a number of voices’ (Young 1996: 7).

The first mention of drugs mules in academic literature was in the early 1980’s in research on the USA/Mexico border (Cloyd 1982). Women’s presence in the international drug trade was similarly noted in Colombia in the early 1980’s (Olmo 1986) and a little later in the UK. The general secretary of the National Association of Probation Officers explained the sudden increase of women imprisoned for drug trafficking: ‘they are the exploited pawns of the drug barons and are being punished as if they were master criminals...the government must introduce a sentence distinction between evil traffickers and their courier victims who should get shorter terms’ (Carvel 1990).

Since the increasing number of women in prison did not fit into contemporary ‘Drug War’ discourse (as structural subordinates: female, black, ostensibly from third world countries) they did not make suitable enemies. Thus in both academic and public discourse, the subcategory of the ‘mule’ as victim was created: ‘the conflict between the role

characteristics and gender stereotyping [...] results in the construction of a subgroup of mules' (Harper et al. 2000:105). 'Sub typing' maintains the group identity/stereotype by 'fencing off' the exceptional cases: 'the representation of the 'masculine' crime of drug trafficking requires the emasculation of the (female) traffickers as mules' (2000: 104/112). This discursive move played on existing binary constructions:

'Crimes images are structured according to a binary logic of representation. Oppositional terms (man/woman, white/black, rational/irrational, mind/body and so on are constructed in a system of value which makes one visible and the other invisible (Young 1996: 1).

Where men were presented as the brains behind trafficking, women were presented as the bodies. Women were represented as submissive, passive receptacles in opposition to the allegedly masculine characteristics of the drug trade characterised by action, risk, violence and danger. This manifests in a widespread assumption in popular and academic writing that women are natural vehicles for drug traffic, since, crudely put by one male respondent: 'they have more places to hide things'. In short, 'the politically sedative myth of women's compliance and harmlessness can be conveniently preserved,' (Allen 1998: 63) and was used to reinforce the myth of the 'evil (male) trafficker' as a suitable enemy.

### **The war on the 'War on Drugs': the construction of a suitable victim**

By framing women's involvement according to traditional models of femininity, political and academic discourses emphasised women's victimhood and served to 'render them harmless' (Allen 1998). By appealing to normative gender ideology, the 'mule' is translated from deviant to 'inoffensive' (Torres 2006a: 113).

This characterisation of the (female) drugs mule as inoffensive has been perpetuated rather than challenged by empirical research. Research on women mules has often been motivated by a (justified humanitarian) need for something to be done about draconian sentencing policies that are ineffective and costly, both for the state and the cost to people and families when a family member is imprisoned in a foreign country. Research by Green was sponsored by the Howard League for Penal Reform (1991); Huling was asked to make public the situation of mules by chaplains working in Rikers Island, New York (Huling 1995; Huling 1996).

'Few have argued for more lenient criminal justice strategies for drug offenders when faced with the moral opprobrium invoked by the drug trafficker. Use of the

term has in recent decades triggered a sense of rage and raised unanimous demands for harsh and retributive punishment.’ (Green 1998: 78).

Campaigners sought to re-brand women mules as ‘prisoners of war’ (Huling 1996) or ‘collateral damage’ (Youngers et al. 2005). Furthermore, research which sought to highlight the plight of the rising numbers of developing world women imprisoned in first world jails have relied on stereotypes of women mules as essentially non-criminal to add political punch to their accounts (Eastal 1993; Hedge and Tarzi 1996; Hord no date; Huling 1996). Whilst raising the profile of female mules imprisoned abroad was (and is) necessary, this research is problematic as it relied on binaries of male/female, agent/victim. Conversely, there is very little research on male mules (the exception is Green 1991).

While dominant discourse frames traffickers as the ‘real’ enemy, mules are a mere consequence: ‘one of the by products of the anti-trafficker push of the 1980’s has been the number of women caught up in the drug enforcement effort’ (Dorn 1992: 189). Furthermore, women mules have been found to be twice victimised: ‘once by the drug dealer and again by the law...it is obvious that the poor and unfortunate women of Jamaica have become yet another cheap and expendable labour in the deal’ (Huling 1996: 57).

### **Conflation of mules and women**

Qualitative research on drug mules has placed a disproportionate emphasis on women has virtually eclipsed the importance of male drug mules (see for example Huling 1996; Olmo 1986; Sudbury 2005; Torres 2006a). Whilst it is true women are ‘over-represented’ in drug trafficking arrest statistics (Green, et al. 1994), the majority of drug mules are men (this will be examined in detail further on).

Only one qualitative study of drug mules has included men (Green 1991). As a result, it often seems that all mules are women and that therefore all female traffickers are mules. The image of the female Jamaican mule who swallows capsules of cocaine has become standard fare in the press (Boseley and Radford 1992; Carvel 1990) and is often invoked in academic writing (Dorn, et al. 1992; Ruggiero and South 1995). Problematically, the subordination of women in the position of the mules is often portrayed as inevitable: ‘overall, the position of women in the drug underworld does not differ from the position of women in general: blocked in criminal careers as they are in legal ones’ (Ruggiero and South, 1995:141).

The result is an implicit gendering of drug trafficking: the 'real' traffickers are Mr Big's whose maleness assures their position at the top. Equally, women's femininity fits them for work (exclusively) as mules.

Thus within this paradigm women's participation in the drug trade is largely rendered passive. This gendering has produced a view of the interplay of gender and drug traffic which is deeply distorting and which has effectively precluded understanding women's participation in the international cocaine trade. This will be examined in more depth in the following chapter.

### **Drug trafficking as 'enterprise crime'**

The 1990's saw a shift in the dominant discourse about drug trafficking:

Drug trafficking is no longer considered only as a 'criminal activity' but rather as a 'commodity trade conducted by trans-national consortiums' which are able to operate successfully only by interacting with and blending into already established legitimate markets. Moreover, the drug business is compared to a modern multinational corporation with the necessary ingredients to conduct successful international enterprise, such as global reach and a creative, flexible organisational structure (Olmo 1996: 42).

Correspondingly, law enforcement efforts have increasingly focussed on discouraging drug trafficking by making it unprofitable. For example there has been a greater focus on prevention through 'financial reporting orders' and increased emphasis on seizing the profits of trafficking (SOCA 2006a). According to Sir Stephen Lander, Chair of the Serious and Organised Crimes Agency: 'it's all about money, stupid. The organised criminals are doing this for money. They are acquisitive crimes. It's all about money.' (2007: 3).

Academically, drug trafficking is conceived as a market: drug crime is seen as a form of 'enterprise' (Edwards and Gill 2002) and as 'business' (Wright 2006). Although Wright makes clear that legitimate and illegitimate 'businesses' are different in important ways, his analysis nonetheless explores trafficking using the terms of legitimate business such as enterprise, transaction costs, profitability and so on (2007: 60). Similarly, recent research by the Matrix Knowledge Group interviewed traffickers as if they were the managers of their businesses. Their research and analysis is explicitly geared towards understanding business structures and modus operandi with a view to discouraging and interrupting drug business (2007). Approaching the 'bosses' of drugs business as business managers is underpinned by rational choice theory. Desroches is typical:

Rational choice theory is applicable to an understanding of drug trafficking since it considers the dealers perspective in order to understand motives, modus operandi and decision making. Offenders are viewed as instrumentally rational actors who choose specific behaviours that will maximise benefits while minimising costs. Crime is chosen as a rational means that offenders believe will be the most effective way to achieve their goals. The expected utility model in economics... views offenders as no different from other citizens who select among behavioural options and maintains that individuals behave 'as if' they are aware of all possible outcomes and their probabilities, potential costs and possible benefits. Would-be offenders use this information to choose rationally between various actions and voluntarily and purposefully choose crime if the expected utility outweighs possible losses. (Desroches 2005: 11).

Whilst rational choice theory may be useful for studying (male) high level dealers, rational choice theory cannot simply be transplanted to women offenders as it contains a set of androcentric assumptions. Pamela Davies offers a critique. She shows that the concept of 'rationality' is deeply rooted in 'masculinist vocabularies' of crime (Davies 2005: 63). She points out that both 'rationality' and the 'rational actor' are concepts have been inherited from western moral philosophy which saw men and women, rational and irrational as dichotomous (2005: 254).

In sum, the 'trafficking as economy' approach also frames drug trafficking in a way which precludes seeing women's involvement. Since women are assumed to be in subordinate roles, they are not seen as valid 'knowers' about how business works.

### **Exclusion of women; generalising from all male samples**

Recent research in the 'drug trafficking as enterprise' paradigm has focussed on upper and mid-level trafficking and drug distribution and has focussed on exclusively male populations. Women have been excluded and findings are generalised from all male samples (Decker and Chapman 2008; Desroches 2005; Reuter and Haaga 1989). Reuter and Haaga cite 'logistical reasons' since 'women make up only 7 percent of drug offenders in federal prisons (1989: 24). Desroches searched for high level female traffickers to take part in his research, he found none. He also had access to the case files of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in which he found no evidence of women's participation (Desroches, 2008: personal communication).

All the studies named above generalise from all male samples to authoritatively describe drug trafficking. Whilst there may be good practical, or ideological reasons for researching only on male traffickers, these are rarely made explicit and the absence of



women from research is rarely noted or problematised. Despite the apparent neutrality of the economic approach, ‘an enterprise model of crime as economy more often than not concedes to popular mythologies about organised crime and the threat it poses.’ (Findlay 1999: 223). This includes an implicit gendered hierarchy about who the real traffickers are. In other words, by privileging the perspectives of those at the top of the business, women are subtly rendered irrelevant.

### **Lack of research on drug traffickers**

Although much has been written about drug trafficking, there is a general lack of serious empirical research on/with/about traffickers. Indeed most recently, there has been a trend towards reliance on secondary sources such as phone taps (Natarajan 2000), trafficker autobiographies (Morselli 2001) or psychological conjecture (Bovenkerk 2000).

There are two possible explanations. The first is the practical difficulty of reaching hidden populations: ‘by their very nature - clandestine, illegal and highly demonized - drug markets and those that inhabit them are relatively hard to access and comparatively difficult to research’ (Coomber 2007:1). In short ‘lack of evidence is simply down to the illicit and by nature, elusive context in which the activity takes place’ (Browne, et al. 2003: 326). Furthermore, since drug trafficking is widely portrayed as underground, organised, armed and dangerous, researchers have been largely discouraged from entering ‘Jurassic Park and play[ing] with dinosaurs’ (Hobbs 1995: 4). Thus studying drug traffickers in their own ‘habitat’ has widely been considered too difficult and too risky to be practical, possible or safe. Notable exceptions exist and will be discussed in the next chapter. Thus in recent years, research that engages with drug traffickers has been largely limited to imprisoned populations (Desroches 2005; Hobbs and Pearson 2001; Matrix Knowledge Group 2007). Research in this vein relies on one-off interviews with imprisoned traffickers in which the interviewer elicits information about the nature and functioning of the drug trafficking industry during a period of up to 4 hours at the most (most recently Matrix Knowledge Group 2007). Male traffickers are treated as largely transparent portals for conveying information about ‘the market’ from their privileged position at the top.

The second possible explanation for the lack of direct research with traffickers about their lives and criminal careers is that this aim has been understood as largely extraneous. Research priorities identified in recent years focus on understanding drug trafficking only to understand how best to disrupt it. This myopic view identifies valid research questions as: ‘how it works, the routes and methods used to supply the market, the size of the market

itself, how the trade reacts to interventions and who the key players are' (Browne et al 2003). Lastly, in policy based research, direct research with traffickers is not necessary as the effects of intervention can be monitored indirectly through indicators such as price and purity (UNODC 2007). Furthermore, taken to its logical conclusion, stopping drug trafficking appears to have little to do with stopping women.

Accordingly, the silence on women's participation can be understood through a wider unwillingness to do direct research with traffickers compounded by gendered conception of the drug business which render women invisible or irrelevant.

### **Review of available literature: where are women in drug trafficking literature?**

Qualitative and quantitative research concludes that women are unquestioningly present in the business of farming, processing, exporting, importing, storing and distributing cocaine.

Qualitative research has found women present in a variety of aspects of the drug trade. Olmo reported that 'in Bolivia, women peasants consistently make up the majority of those employed as *pisadoras* (coca treaders), coca leaf vendors in the markets, or sellers of the chemicals needed to produce cocaine' (Olmo 1993: 40). Women's participation is notably high in the 'Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia' (FARC) where up to 45% of members are reported to be female (Gonzalez-Perez 2006). Nonetheless, the connection between the FARC and drug trafficking is unclear and the question is politically loaded. According to respondents from Colombia who brokered cocaine, the FARC play an important role in taxing producers and brokers of cocaine (both in *basuco*<sup>2</sup> and hydrochloride). Nonetheless, women's presence should not be read as participation (see Maher 1997).

Rossi claims that where women are to be found in positions of legitimate power, they will logically also be found in positions of illegitimate power, so closely linked are corruption of all forms and the state in Argentina (2007). Although state corruption, organised crime and drug trafficking are linked and overlap, it is unclear from Rossi's evidence to what extent and in what role women are involved with drug trafficking. Rossi also notes that women are to be found in positions where they exercise power 'indirectly': 'as wives, sisters, cousins, in-laws, wives of friends, friends and lovers of men involved in organised crime. They occupy positions thanks to their loyalty or pull the strings backstage.'

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<sup>2</sup> *Pasta* and *basuco* both refer to the product of the first and most basic stage of refinement, usually conducted in small field 'laboratories'. At this stage it can be smoked but requires further refinement before it becomes exportable cocaine hydrochloride. For more information see Inciardi (1987).

(Rossi 2007: 165-6). In the late 1970's Patricia Adler's research into high level drug smugglers in California revealed a different picture. Adler concluded that trafficking was 'a man's world' (1993: 1999, footnote 2) in which women feature as 'dope chicks' and trophy wives:

The majority of women in Southwest County's drug world took passive roles, however. A crowd of dope chicks formed part of the entourage which surrounded the dealers and smugglers. Universally beautiful and scantily clad, they served as prestigious escorts, so that dealers could show them off to the other members of the community. (Adler 1993: 91).

There is limited anecdotal evidence of women taking central organisational roles in drug trafficking organisations, for example Sandra Avila Beltran, who allegedly had a key role in trafficking cocaine in Mexico (Tuckman 2007, October 6th). Ethnographic research on the *Cártel de Juárez* in Ciudad Juárez/El Paso has revealed that women participated at all levels of the trade including the top (Campbell 2008).

Lastly, women's role in street-level drug distribution which has been well researched in the USA (Bourgois 2003; Fagan 1994; Jacobs and Miller 1998; Maher 1997; Maher and Curtis 1992; Sommers, et al. 1996), Australia (Denton 2001; Denton and O'Malley 1999; Denton and O'Malley 2001) and Argentina (Rossi 2007: 170).

In short, available qualitative data point to the fact that drug trafficking does not take place in some mythical underworld, populated only by hard men in suits smoking cigars: it takes place in diverse social contexts in which women are undoubtedly present.

Quantitative research reveals that women's involvement is significant and possibly increasing. In the UK 29% of those arrested for trafficking offences are women (Green, et al. 1994: 480). Internationally, the proportion of women varies between 25 and 30% of traffickers: in Holland women represented 30% (Van Putten, cited by Huling 1996: 46) and in Germany 24% (Albrecht 1996: 69). Importantly though these figures reveal that the majority of people carrying drugs across international borders are men. Although not all men (or indeed women) arrested with drugs at international borders will be drug mules, it is important to note that 'mule-work' cannot be considered a particularly 'female' type of crime<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly, there was significant variance according to nationality amongst women arrested arriving at airports in the UK with drugs: '60 per cent of Jamaicans, 45 per cent of Nigerians and 33 per cent of Ghanaians [were] women. In contrast only 23 per cent

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents who recruited drug mules confirmed that the majority of mules were in fact men. Estimates with a variety of men who worked in drug trafficking organisations, or who recruited mules confirmed that men make up at least 50% of drug mules.

of British nationals, 14 per cent of Colombians and 5 per cent of Pakistanis were women.’ (Green, et al. 1994: 480). Nonetheless, this racial disparity should be read critically: whilst on one hand it may reflect national differences in women’s participation, it may equally be the result of racial bias in intelligence profiling which leads to arrest (Ruggiero and South 1995: 116). Around the time that this data reports, female Jamaican mules dominated press accounts (Carvel 1990).

Furthermore, some data shows that the number of women involved may be increasing. The 1994 Annual Report of the Colombian Police force noted a 543% increase in the number of ‘women traffickers’ between 1983 and 1984: (Olmo 1986: 162). Figures are much less dramatic elsewhere. In the UK 15% of traffickers’ were women in 1989; this rose to 19% in 1995 (Home Office 1997, cited by Harper et al. 2000: 102). In a similar study also in the UK, women represented 26% of arrested traffickers in 1992 and 29% in 1996 (Harper and Murphy 1999: 18). Again, arrest statistics should be read critically.

Prison statistics worldwide show that the number of women imprisoned for drug crimes has increased significantly since the early 1980’s. In 1993, Eastaer noted that 36.2% of the women’s prison population in Australia were drugs offenders and that this correlated with a high number of foreign born prisoners (1993). Across Latin America, prison numbers have soared in the last 20 years and drug offences now characterise the majority of women prisoners in Chile (Aliaga 2001), Ecuador (Pontón and Torres 2007), Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela (Olmo 1990) and Argentina (Rossi 2007).

In Ecuador, the prison population was operating at double capacity at the end of 2005 and was close to triple capacity at the end of 2006. This increase is the result of an influx of drug traffickers (Nuñez 2006b: 5). In the women’s prison, almost 70% of the population are imprisoned for drug crime, in the men’s prison the figure is 58% (ibid). However, these statistics must be read with caution: in Ecuador there is no distinction between different kinds of drug offences as is the case in the UK. Although possession of small amounts is officially decriminalised, in practice this is not the case (see Edwards 2003: 3).

Given the international pressure to demonstrate efforts to intercept drugs en route, arrest figures should be understood as an indicator of local and international politics as much as an indicator of crime patterns. It should also be noted that the dramatic rise in the number of prisoners sentenced for drug crime can also be attributed to the long sentences given to drug offenders across the region (Bergman and Azaola 2007). In Ecuador automatic release halfway through the sentence was withdrawn in 2002 which resulted in a rapid increase in

prison population. Although these limitations are particular to Ecuador, they highlight the difficulty in comparing international statistics out with the context of local politics.

These statistics have been misread by some who claim that a 'high proportion are women' (Ruggiero and South 1995: 116). Although women are over-represented in popular and academic accounts of drugs mules, women are consistently a minority of those arrested in airports/international borders for trafficking offences.

### **The subject of this thesis: subject, scope and territory**

The terms 'drug trafficking' and 'traffickers' are problematic: they are highly politicised and are used to refer to a very broad range of activities: these vary from low level distribution/dealing (for example Kalunta-Crumpton 1998), money laundering, drug production, drug processing, drugs mules and drugs 'bosses' (see also Olmo 1993).

The 'trafficking' of this research is inter-continental cocaine and heroin trafficking out of Latin America (via Ecuador) to the rest of the world. Ecuador does not produce cocaine. The cocaine that is exported through Ecuador comes mainly from Colombia and Peru (UNODC 2007). Cocaine from Ecuador is mainly exported to North America and Europe (ibid). There were also a significant number of prisoners from Africa, the Middle East, Thailand and the Far East indicating that cocaine was also being exported to these countries. Although the title of this thesis is Women in the *cocaine* trade, this research also included respondents who were carrying heroin (although all thought they were carrying cocaine). A small quantity of heroin is made and produced in Colombia (UNODC 2007). The small heroin trade appears to be tied to the dominant cocaine trade.

'Trafficking' in this research is limited to international importing/exporting of drugs. It does not include internal trafficking and brokering of cocaine within Ecuador or Latin America, nor does it cover distribution at wholesale or street level. The 'traffickers', in this research, are those involved in the transportation of drugs across international borders. This includes the initial *contact* who makes the offer and organises for the mule to travel; the second *contact* in Ecuador who may meet and mind the mule and make sure that they leave the country with the drugs. It also includes the mule who physically carries the drugs. These roles will be expanded in greater detail later on.

Research was conducted in prisons in Ecuador (the reasons for which will be discussed in the methodology chapter). Importantly though, the traffickers in this research come from all over the world and were part of trafficking enterprises ranging from the very small (one person) to medium sized groups. The 'trafficking' covered in this research is not

one homogenous organisation, but rather interviews from people with diverse corners of the globe allow snapshots of an industry that is rarely limited to set geographic space.

### **Crime in context: drug trafficking and globalisation**

So far I have described two dominant ways of conceiving and researching drug trafficking: as 'alien threat' and as 'international enterprise'. Whilst these paradigms may be useful for addressing some research questions, they are unsuitable approaches for understanding the role of women in drug trafficking as they render women invisible, irrelevant or distort their experience to fit gender stereotypes. Thus in order to 'see' women's experiences as drug traffickers it is necessary to work within a different paradigm.

This thesis approaches trafficking in its social context. Findlay argues: 'crime is a social phenomenon involving people, places and institutions. Crime can neither exist nor make sense without its particular social context.' (1999: 6).

The social context in which drug trafficking takes place is characterised by globalisation. Although the nature and outcomes of the process of globalisation are contested (Burawoy 2000; Urry 2003: 3), nonetheless the phenomenon is widely agreed to be characterised by the increasingly rapid movement of people, objects and information around the globe: 'capital, culture, technology and politics come together to roam beyond the regulatory power of the nation state' (Beck 1999b: 107). Broadly speaking the effects of this on society are the compression of time and space and the decline in importance of the nation state. As a result, society and culture are being profoundly reshaped in ways that are no longer bounded by culture, community or nation (see for example Burawoy 2000; Urry 2000b).

Although the drug trade is not a new phenomenon (Bancroft 2009; Coomber 2006), its current success, mode of operation and technologies are intimately connected with wider trends of globalised consumerism, international business, travel and transport. The success of the drugs trade is built on the success of 'licit' globalisation and is a force behind it. Although studies of globalisation are predominantly focussed on licit processes and structures, Findlay contends that crime has played a significant role in the process of globalisation (1999: 1). The drug trade moves money, goods, information and people around the globe contributing further to the process of the compression of time and space and undermining endogenous structures (for example legal structures).

Furthermore, there are some characteristics of the drug trade which are particularly globalised. It is not located in one time or place (Dorn, et al. 2005: 22) yet it is ubiquitous in

almost all corners of the globe: 'crime is no longer hidden in dark alleys, spooky interrogation rooms or gloomy prison cells. It is up for sale in the networks and is there at the dinner table' (Findlay 1999: 48 see also UNODC 2008). It is this 'disembeddedness' that particularly characterises the phenomenon of drug trafficking as an aspect of cultural globalisation (Young 2007). Thus, the context of this research is therefore not defined by geographical or cultural boundaries. 'Context' is employed here as a central concept within the analysis of this study, in preference to overworked notions such as 'community', 'society' or 'culture' (Findlay 1999: 6) which have been associated with society or culture attached to geographic locales.

The 'disembeddedness' of the drug trade makes it difficult to comprehend. Prior ethnographic studies of the drug trade have studied globalised locals such as Southwestern Country in Adler's *Wheeling and Dealing* (1993) or transnational connections such as Zaitch's study of Colombians in the Netherlands in *Trafficking Cocaine* (2002). Although data for this thesis was collected in a specific geographical location (prison), respondents come from all over the globe. In order to conceptualise the drug trafficking of this research, a radical reconceptualisation of social life is required.

Urry contends that society has been materially reconfigured: the 'social is now characterised by flows and mobilities' (2000b: 2). Accordingly, he replaces the static metaphor of the social as society with metaphors of flow and motion which he posits as a way to make sense of these transformations (2000b: 191). His description of these metaphors is extensive and detailed. I use his schema of metaphors in a limited way.

Urry proposes that the relationships between people, places and things can be imagined as a network (his claim is founded on those of other commentators on globalisation including Castells 1996). Networks are composed of connections between people, places, things and technologies which stretch across regional and international boundaries. This network is composed of 'nodes' and 'scapes'. Nodes are the points of the web where the threads of the network intersect (i.e. a hub). 'Scapes' are the connections between nodes along which objects, people and information move (Urry 2000a). Networks are not purely social; but also composed of technologies, objects and information (Urry 2000a).

Globalisation studies are at an 'early stage of recording, mapping, classifying and monitoring the 'global' and its effects.' (Urry 2003: 3). My intention in this thesis is not to engage with debates about the nature of globalisation but rather to suggest that imagining globalisation as the context for drug trafficking may be useful. The metaphor of the network makes it possible to see drug trafficking in the context of other global and transnational flows of people: from low paid, migrant service workers to highly paid, high profile workers

in international corporations and global governance organisations such as the UN, to those who travel for education, fun and experience as tourists. Furthermore, in this context, the flow of drugs can be contextualised in wider flows and mobilities of culture, ideas and practices, including trends for drug use.

Importantly, in adopting Urry's metaphors I do not intend to adopt his approach wholesale. It is problematic, not least because of his concern with technologies and objects above people: the 'unhuman' aspects of globalisation (Urry 2000). Thus, the use of these metaphors is experimental. Burawoy warns: 'we are in danger of straight-jacketing the world we study. Disciplining it so that it conforms to the framework through which we observe it. We must expose our theories to continual critique...' (2000: 28).

Nonetheless, the importance of borders and boundaries cannot be ignored altogether. Although trafficking does appear to transcend national boundaries, drug trafficking relies on these boundaries to exist: they insure profit margins and reinforce the kinds of inequalities that make the drug trade possible (Findlay 1999: 116). Furthermore, drug trafficking does not float free from place altogether: 'organised crime is local at all points' (Hobbs 1998). Furthermore, 'it makes no good sense to define the global as if the global excludes the local....defining the global in such a way suggests that the global lies beyond all localities, as have systematic properties over and beyond the attributes of units within a global system.' (Robertson 1995: 34 cited by Hobbs 1998: 419). Thus, this 'dialectic' between the local and the global (Hobbs: 1998: 416) is a feature of this thesis.

Lastly, the global social is not unitary, 'nor is it an ideological community or state' (Mann cited by Urry 2000: 190). Globalisation has not happened equally: it is an asymmetrical process which has affected some parts of the world more than others. Findlay notes: 'like modernisation, crime can marginalise and reintegrate, unify and divide.' (1999:224 see also Young 2007). Accordingly, Urry's metaphors of movement may be more or less applicable in different parts of the world.

### **Chapter summary and aims of this thesis**

So far in this chapter I have offered a feminist critique of existing research on drug trafficking and concluded that drug trafficking has largely been framed in ways which exclude or distort women's involvement. I have reviewed the small body of research on women traffickers which concludes that they are present in various levels and roles in drug trafficking. My critique echoes early feminist critiques of criminology: namely the invisibility and distortion surrounding women who commit crime (Heidensohn 1968; Smart



1977). Although this critique is well established, this chapter shows that these issues continue to be pertinent (Moore 2008). Interestingly though, women drug mules are not invisible so much as hyper-visible. Indeed, this hyper visibility of mules in popular culture has strengthened widespread acceptance of these stereotypes as based on fact.

This thesis contributes to research on the drug trade in two main ways. Firstly, I aim to expose and challenge sexism and gender blindness in social research on drug trafficking and secondly, through empirical research with women drug traffickers I aim to address the gap in empirical evidence on women in the drug trade.

## CHAPTER 2: WOMEN DRUG MULES: VICTIMISATION AND VOLITION

### Introduction: explaining women's presence in the drug trade

In chapter 1 I described the two main ways that drug trafficking has been conceptualised popularly, politically and academically: firstly as an 'alien threat' and secondly as an 'international market'. I showed that both these paradigms are imbued with sexist assumptions about the role of women in the drug trade. In this chapter I examine and critique the small body of published work which has sought to examine women's involvement in mule-work through empirical investigation on/with women connected to the international drug trade. There are two dominant explanations for women's involvement in drug trafficking which are linked to the two paradigms described in chapter 1. Firstly, the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis focuses on women's involvement in drug trafficking through the lens of victimisation. This explanation parallels the construction of the (male) drug trafficker as an archetypal villain and the (female) mule as the archetypal victim. The second explanation for women's involvement in mule-work focuses on how structural changes – both in the licit world and the 'criminal underworld' - have facilitated women's involvement. This explanation is underpinned by the conceptualisation of the drug trade as a 'transnational economic' phenomenon (Olmo 1996: 42).

Appendix 1 provides an overview of qualitative research on drug trafficking.

### 'Feminisation of poverty'

When a woman commits a crime and does it with a man, we focus our attention on the man because we think he was the instigator... Perhaps, this is due to a patriarchal vision that keeps us from seeing women in a role we consider purely male... I am not aware of any studies of criminal women in Argentina. Crime is a man's game. We leave you [women] the role of victim.  
(Federal Judge in Argentina cited by Rossi 2007: 163).

Among the couriers there is one group that in my opinion always has to be seen as victim. They are the women. The backward position of women in the third world makes it impossible for them to refuse the exploitation, pressure or even blackmail they are confronted with.  
(John Van Putten (corrections officer) cited by Huling 1995: 60).

The ‘feminisation of poverty’ is one of the most enduring explanations for women’s involvement in drug trafficking<sup>4</sup>. Mules in popular culture are uniformly presented as propelled into working as a mule by poverty whether in film (Marston 2005), journalistic accounts (Boseley and Radford 1992; Gillan 2003, 1st October; Jeavans 2005) or the academic accounts this section will now examine.

The earliest account of women drug mules comes from Venezuela (Olmo 1986). Olmo reported that a large percentage of women imprisoned for drug trafficking offences were single (67.6%), described their occupation as ‘housewife’ (53%) and were arrested at home (48%) (1986: 170/173). According to Rosa del Olmo, a combination of economic crisis and globalisation created conditions which led to the ‘development and consolidation of the drug industry on the American continent during the 1980’s, a decade that forced broad sectors of the population to devote themselves to the production, exportation, maintenance and logistical support of drugs and the drug trade.’ (1993: 8). At a local level: ‘...participation in other aspects of the drug trade is closely linked to rural and urban unemployment and the rise and acceptance of the ‘informal economy’ as a way to cushion the effects of the economic crisis.’ (1993: 9). Furthermore, she contends that ‘economic hardship, which affects women more severely than it does men in times of crisis and unemployment, pushes them towards illegal activities which provide greater employment’ (Olmo 1986: 167). Moreover, ‘due to their dependent and subordinate condition in society, they are usually assigned to perform the most difficult and risky tasks,’ (1986: 164) and receive ‘pittances for their work’ (1986: 167).

Recent research has buttressed this ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis. Several quantitative studies have found that women are ‘over-represented’ in arrest figures and that a significant portion is comprised of single mothers (Dorado 2005, Green 1991, Huling 1995). Recently, Dorado’s study of Colombian ‘mules’ imprisoned in Europe replicated these findings. She found that 85% of respondents (all of whom were women) were single parents who had the sole responsibility of care for their children and were often also caring for their parents (Dorado 2005: 314). She points to the wider geopolitical context of economic crisis and structural subordination whereby women bear the brunt of economic crush. Furthermore she point to women’s position as structural subordinates and concludes that women are propelled into drug trafficking out of ‘economic desperation’ (Dorado 1996: 35).

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis as it relates to women’s involvement in drug trafficking is somewhat different from the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis as it relates to women’s involvement more generally. The feminisation of poverty thesis as it relates to women’s offending generally has focussed on hierarchical divisions of gender (i.e. patriarchy). However, the ‘feminism of poverty’ thesis described by Olmo and Sudbury is instead preoccupied with hierarchical divisions and inequalities on a global scale.

Julia Sudbury interviewed twenty four imprisoned female drug mules in Canada, England and the USA (2002; 2005). She has not yet published a detailed analysis of the data from the interviews, however she offers instead a short description of Jamaican women's involvement in the drug trade to support her larger arguments on the 'global prison industrial complex' (2005). Sudbury is the first to highlight the need to appreciate women's agency to fully comprehend their involvement:

It is tempting to separate these women into two groups, the innocent victims of intimidation and deception and the willing participants of crime. [...] However, this dualistic portrayal limits our ability to analyse the reasons why women are willing to risk their lives and liberty by swallowing condoms filled with heroin or carrying criminalised drugs in their luggage. (Sudbury 2005: 172).

However, Sudbury concludes that:

the women I interviewed became involved in the trans-national drug trade through three paths: economic need, threats and coercion and deception. Faced with poverty and often without a second income to support the family, many women make the choice to risk carrying drugs, sometimes believing it will be a one-off (2002: 67).

Echoing Olmo 20 years earlier, she concludes that 'it is this erosion of women's economic security under neoliberal globalisation that drives many to participate in criminalised drug networks' (2005: 174). In sum, Sudbury's account ultimately reproduces Olmo's homogenous (and homogenising) explanation for women's participation.

### **Feminisation of poverty: critique**

Whilst 20 years on, the 'victimisation causes crime' thesis remains the dominant theory for explaining women's entry into drug trafficking. Nonetheless, it has been heavily critiqued in relation to other types of apparently economically motivated offending, for example shoplifting (Davies 2003), drug dealing (Denton 2001; Maher 1997) prostitution (Phoenix 2000) as well as other non acquisitive deviant behaviour such as gang involvement (Joe and Chesneylind 1995; Laidler and Hunt 2001; Miller 2001) and violence (Batchelor 2007). The feminisation of poverty thesis is problematic on several accounts.

### **Narrow conceptualisation of gender**

The 'feminisation of poverty' explains women's presence in the drug trade exclusively in conventional terms of female gender. It essentialises and homogenises women in their biological role as mothers and excludes women who are single, childless or fail to fit

into traditional models of femininity (Smart similarly criticised early criminological theories of women's offending for over-reliance on normative gender (1977)). Furthermore, the 'feminisation of poverty' as it relates to women mules it is premised on fulfilling a (legitimate) economic need. However the meaning of this becomes unstable in the global context since the meanings of poverty and deprivation are relative to local and historical circumstances (Townsend 1979: 31).

Furthermore, empirical studies of drug mules have excluded men (Dorado 1996; Dorado 2005; Harper, et al. 2000; Huling 1996; Olmo 1986; Olmo 1990; Olmo 1993; Sudbury 2002; Sudbury 2005). Sidelining men's participation in mule-work is a particularly problematic given that – without exception - statistical data has shown that the majority of drug mules are men (as established in chapter 1).

Only Green has explored the variety of meanings that geopolitical crisis and poverty have for male mules (Green 1991; Green 1998a; Green, et al. 1994). In *Drug Couriers* (1991), Green presents a case study of 19 Nigerian 'couriers', all of which were men. She highlights the importance of context, in this case the Nigerian political economy (1991: 36).

Many of the men that she interviewed were Ibo. As a consequence of the Biafran civil War they were subject to institutionalised racism which made it difficult to find formal employment. Many Ibo moved into trade and opened small businesses. Following the 1986 devaluation of the Nigerian currency (the Naira) the Ibo were the most vulnerable to effects of widespread financial crisis (1991: 38). Against a background of ongoing political economic crisis, she portrays male mules as 'educated but destitute': well educated, some occupied professional positions, other were traders and self employed businessmen.

Thus, gender may not always be the most salient factor: in this context ethnicity profoundly affected legitimate opportunities – and in turn provided a meaningful context for 'employment' in the international drugs trade.

### **Narrow conceptualisation of poverty/economic motivations**

Accounts of women drug mules which have provided support for the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis have done little to investigate the meanings of the 'economic' in women mules' lives beyond a somewhat taken for granted understanding of 'survival'. Explanations which rely on macro level poverty (i.e. geopolitical explanations) have done little to explore the meanings of these macro level crises in the micro-levels of women's experiences (in particular what 'survival' means in diverse local contexts). Furthermore, focussing only on 'survival' leaves little space to appreciate offending that may be both rational and economically motivated by 'a vision of prosperity and the attraction and pull of material

possessions' beyond simple 'survival' (Davies 2003). There has been little consideration that women mules might be motivated to work as a mule for material gain unrelated to their role as a mother in the home even though this has been well established in mainstream feminist criminology (Heidensohn 2006: 2).

In short, although the 'economic' may be an important motivating factor in women mules' involvement, it may not be economic survival, rather economic betterment that plays an important motivating role. Furthermore, escaping 'poverty' may not be the sole motivation. Carlen considered 95% of the women she interviewed to have been in poverty at some time during their offending career. Nonetheless, although this was an important factor in their offending, a significant portion claimed that a desire for excitement, rather than poverty, had been a significant motivating factor (1988: 72). Lastly, at first glance accepting work as a mule potentially involves significant opportunities for excitement that may have been otherwise unattainable: foreign travel, staying in a hotel, seeing another country and so on. These have not been explored in previous accounts of women's motivation to become involved trafficking drugs. Notably, recent feminist research on women's involvement in other types of crime has found that women were (at least in part) attracted by excitement (Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe 2007). For example, Denton's research on Australian women's involvement in drug dealing found that excitement was one of several attractions for the women involved as well as autonomy, respect, respectability (Denton and O'Malley 2001). Interestingly, Brotherton's research found that women drew a number of positive qualities – autonomy and independence - from their involvement in gangs and drug dealing (1996). Lastly, Torres' research suggests that participating in trafficking was a rational trade off by her respondents for love (Torres 2006a). This suggests that there may be 'capitals' beyond economic or expressive which are yet to be explored.

Furthermore, research on masculinities found that participating in crime had a number of outcomes – not only in terms of material acquisition, but also expressive. Simon Winlow's research on the relationship between masculinities and crime showed that crime has a variety of meanings and consequences:

As with aspects of the black economy, neutralisation, symbolism and economic rationality blend to offer a viable means of engaging in the market and deriving from it a diversity of meanings and understandings, as well as cold, hard cash (Winlow 2001: 154).

In sum, criminological research suggests that interpreting women's mule-work as solely an economic venture obscures the wide variety of meanings and benefits which can potentially be derived.

### **Overemphasising victimisation**

Previous accounts of women mules have overemphasised women's structural subordination and interpersonal victimisation. Although these should not be ignored, producing accounts in which women passively suffer 'personal misfortunes' rather than being the author of 'personal misdeeds' (Allen 1998: 63), there remains little space to appreciate women's agency as mules.

By positing 'poverty' as the single driving force behind women's involvement, 'women are cast as submissive objects, serving as mere automata for the reproduction of determining structures. Constituted by and through their status as victims they are devoid of choice, responsibility or accountability; fragments of social debris floundering in a theoretical tide of victimage' (Maher 1997: 1). Furthermore, focussing the research gaze on victimisation: 'tends to create the false impression that women have *only* been victims, that they have never successfully fought back, that women cannot be effective social agents on behalf of themselves or others' (Harding 1987: 5 cited by Miller 2002: 434).

Empirical evidence is now emerging which challenges both the homogenous portrayal of drug mules as universally poor and from the third world. The first study to approach mules' involvement from any perspective other than structural subordination is Torres' Masters thesis on women mules (2006a). She explores women's involvement through their own narratives which she analyses in detail. The three mules that she interviewed did not fit the stereotypical profile of the mule: they were not struggling financially nor were they single mothers. In these accounts, Torres' proposes 'that 'love' emerges as a possible interpretation of the lived experience for these women.' (2006a: 40, my translation). In exploring this alternative motivating force through narrative methods, Torres makes significant theoretical space for women's agency, although little for how social structures may constrain women's options. Studying only three women makes it difficult to claim any generalisability: studying three women who were not impoverished undoubtedly shapes the conclusions that she draws. Nonetheless, what Torres does usefully do is to unsettle the heterogeneity of poverty as the sole motivating force. In doing so, she makes clear that a monocausal explanation cannot attend to the diverse experiences of women mules.

## **The drug trade as 'equal opportunities employer'**

In the last chapter I noted how in the 1990's academic conceptualisations of drug trafficking shifted to conceptualise drug trafficking as an economy. There are two hypotheses for women's involvement in drug trafficking related to macro conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

In the first perspective, the conceptualisation of women as mules (and only as mules) persists. Women's participation in the illicit economy is 'obviously' restricted by their gender as in legal business: 'overall, the position of women in the drug underworld does not differ from the position of women in general: blocked in criminal careers as they are in legal ones' (Ruggiero and South 1995:141). This hypothesis was 'confirmed' by the appearance of women as mules (and only as mules) in research on drug traffickers (Dorn, et al. 1992; Ruggiero and South 1995; Zaitch 2002). However, as I demonstrated in chapter 1, many studies which have approached drug trafficking from the 'drug trafficking as business' perspective have explicitly excluded women from their research. Thus, the assumption that women are only ever mules in drug trafficking has not been explored empirically (most recently see Decker and Chapman 2008, Desroches 2005). A very recent exception is Campbell's ethnography of the Juarez Cartel (2008). He presents interview data from women from all levels of the 'cartel': as mules and middle-women, but also as tough bosses (2008: 245).

In the second perspective authors have argued that 'emancipation' of women in the licit world has led to women's greater participation in crime (and in particular the drugs trade). This is often referred to as the 'emancipation' or 'opportunity' thesis. This hypothesis is not new. It owes much to Freda Adler's *Sisters in Crime* (1976). She claimed that: 'as the position of women approximates the position of men, so does the frequency and type of their criminal activity' (1976: 251). Furthermore, she thought that as women became emancipated like men, they would seek the same kinds of security and status 'criminal as well as civil, through established male hierarchical channels.' (1976: 11).

Adler's hypothesis has been subject to much debate, analysis, critique and counter analysis (Box and Hale 1983) and has been periodically challenged (Batchelor 2007; Smart 1979). Nonetheless, the stereotype of the 'new female criminal' or 'gangster bitch' (Maher 1997) endures in relation to women in the drug trade, especially in connection with the cocaine trade somewhat paradoxically alongside that of the women as archetypal victim. Aside from problems with lack of evidence, studies in this paradigm have largely failed to see women's agency in any form other than 'like men'. Writing about women in the street level cocaine market, Maher writes: 'the desire to demonstrate that women are active



subjects often degenerates into accounts which can be misread as evidence of women having control and power equivalent to that of men.' (1997: 198).

In the USA, Fagan contended that women's increased presence in the street level drug trade is a result of both women's emancipation from their domestic role and the simultaneous rapid expansion of cocaine and crack cocaine markets which created opportunities for their participation (1994). Bourgois similarly contends that that: 'greater female involvement in crack reflects in a rather straightforward manner the growing emancipation of women throughout all aspects of inner city life, culture and economy' (1989: 643). However he also acknowledges that women's presence in the crack market may result in victimisation rather than emancipation: 'the underlying process of emancipation that has enabled women to demand equal opportunities in street culture and to carve out an expanded niche for themselves in the underground economy has led to a greater deprecation of women as sex objects.' (1989: 645).

International drug trafficking organisations have also been subject to significant structural change which may have facilitated women's involvement. Peter Reuter established that structured, hierarchical criminal organisations have largely been superseded by smaller, more flexible groups (1983; 1989). His hypothesis has been widely confirmed by further empirical research (Decker and Chapman 2008; Desroches 2005; Dorn, et al. 2005; Paoli 2001; Paoli 2002; Ruggiero and South 1995; Zaitch 2002). The move towards smaller, less hierarchical impermanent groups has been posited as an explanation for women's entrance into 'organised crime groups' where their presence has been increasingly visible (Allum 2007; Fiandaca 2007b; Longrigg 1998; Longrigg 2007; McVeigh 2007, May 28th; Panorama 2007, 28th May; Rossi 2007).

Don Henry Ford, author and drug trafficker cynically contends: 'Women's lib worked. They too get to go to prison now' (interviewed by Campbell 2008: 239). Campbell nonetheless concludes that: 'The growing involvement of women in the drug trade, with some exceptions, can be linked to the interacting effects of greater social freedoms for women and economic marginalisation' (2008: 259).

Lastly, Hobbs contends that there have been significant cultural shifts in the subculture in which professional crime (including drug crime) takes place which have facilitated women's involvement:

Although it is difficult to analyse precisely, traditional limitations on gender expectations would appear to be breaking down. [...] There are now opportunities for women within serious crime via the drugs trade that were unthinkable within markets less inclined towards the orthodoxies of the trade and the nurturing of entrepreneurship.' (1995: 120-1).

Craftsmen are redundant, artisans devalued; it is the entrepreneur who thrives. Parallels with the legitimate world are irresistible. The market, rather than the cosy, familiar world of hard men and cheeky chappies now dominates. (1995: 28).

### **Drug dealing as an alternative route to emancipation**

Lastly, some observers contend that participation in the drug trade may be an alternative route to emancipation whether at street level (Denton and O'Malley 1999: 514), or in the international drug trade: 'the development of illegal markets, connected in part to socio-economic evolution and globalisation offers greater opportunities to women as well; their growing entrance into the criminal world constitutes a reaction against discrimination, an instrument (though arguable) of emancipation from the perspective of gender equality.' (Fiandaca 2007a: 4). Campbell similarly proposes that participation in drug smuggling may be a route to 'female empowerment and liberation from forms of male control' (2008: 238) although he adds that women operating at the middle and lower levels of the drugs trade experience far less emancipation and greater victimisation as a result of their involvement in the drugs trade than those few women at the top.

### **Evidence and interpretations of victimisation and agency**

#### *Street level drug markets*

In *Sexed Work* Maher criticises the proliferation of the 'emancipation thesis' in relation to women's participation in street level dealing (1997, chapter 1). She explicitly criticises Bourgois' analysis for its limited empirical exploration of the ways in which gender structures (and constricts) women's participation in the street level drug economy. She also notes that Bourgois fails to incorporate women into his wider thesis of 'conjugated oppression' (Maher 1997: 13); in other words although his overall thesis claims to be about the position of Puerto Ricans in New York women are a tangent of this theme.

Her next criticism is that women's activity on the streets is confused with equality and presence with participation (1997: 18). Maher conducted ethnographic research into the role of women in a Brooklyn crack market to understand the nature and meanings of women's presence in the street level drug trade. She contends instead that 'the drug economy neither creates nor produces distinguishing statuses of sex/gender and race/ethnicity but rather seeks to reproduce them to individual, organisational and economic advantage.' (1997: 203).

### **Professional crime**

Hobbs's claim that the culture of crime has undergone significant changes is based on ethnographic observation. Nonetheless, the evidence which he presents to support his claims is a case study of one woman, Moira, who sells kilo quantities of marijuana (Hobbs 1995). His account of Moira's participation is limited and leaves important questions unexplored: in particular the role of her dealer partner in her involvement and career and the violent nature of the drugs business.

Moira got involved in dealing through her boyfriend and business partner. She acknowledges that having a male partner is fundamental to her success: 'you can't deal on your own as a woman... it's not safe' (1995: 28). Violence has traditionally been associated with drug markets (Dorn, et al. 2005; Pearson and Hobbs 2001) and is sometimes posed as an explanation for the exclusion of women. Although Moira occasionally deals in cocaine, she deems dealing in marijuana 'just a bit safer' (1995: 24). That she chooses to deal marijuana rather than cocaine for reasons of safety raises important issues about differences in culture between drug markets. Furthermore, Hobbs gives no details about other 'intersectionalities' which might shape her experiences as a dealer: Moira's ethnicity, age and educational achievement are not mentioned; gender takes primacy.

### **Women in 'The Mafia' and organised crime**

Empirical evidence on women in international crime groups (or Mafias) is somewhat superficial. *Women in the Mafia* brings together a collection of studies on women in organised crime associations in Italy (Fiandaca 2007b). The collection also includes a variety of international contributions from Japan, Argentina, the USA, Russia and Brazil (Fiandaca 2007b). In spite of the large international variety, the contributions overwhelmingly rely on secondary sources – court transcriptions, phone taps, newspaper accounts and so on. It is extremely difficult to interpret the meaning of women's participation on the basis of secondary evidence. It is left to journalists to interview women in organised crime first hand (Longrigg 1998; Longrigg 2004; McVeigh 2007, May 28th; Panorama 2007, 28th May).

Campbell's ethnographic research on the Juarez cartel is the most methodologically sound research on women in the international drug trade (2008). Nonetheless, like Bourgois and Hobbs, his research on women is part of a larger study, in this case the Juarez cartel (Campbell forthcoming). Although his analysis is limited, he does succeed in moving beyond dualistic stereotypes of women in the drugs trade. He concludes that both marginalisation and greater social freedoms for women contribute to women's participation in the drugs trade on the US-Mexico border.

## **Women in the international drug trade: emancipated women or victims of poverty?**

This chapter has examined two dominant explanations for women's presence in the drugs industry. The question of whether women's offending is a result of (or results in) victimisation or emancipation dominates. This question is unanswerable on the basis of existing data. Furthermore, the scope and range of questions asked in existing research is limited. Most studies have focused on the search for a structural explanation for women's participation in the international drugs trade. There is very little research so far on women's experiences of working in the drugs trade (the only recent exception is Campbell 2008). Lastly, previous research has been limited by narrow conceptualisation of gender and only limited attention to women's agency. In sum:

### **Agency**

Structural explanations dominate. As a result there is little space left to conceive of women's agency. Where accounts conceptualise structure and agency as ontological binaries, there is no theoretical space in which to consider how social structures and women's agency may interact or be interrelated.

### **Gender**

In all the above accounts gender is conceptualised as a social structure which pushes individuals – by dint of being female and poor – into drug trafficking. Furthermore, female gender is femininity is conceptualised in narrow and normative ways. This has produced a narrow account of the role of gender in women's participation in the drug trade.

### **Conflation of women/mules**

Studies of mules have overwhelmingly reproduced, rather than questioned, the stereotype of the mules as feminised and consequently victimised. As a result, they have not been able to distinguish between gendered victimisation as experienced by female mules and victimisation of all mules. This blurring between gendered victimisation and structural victimisation in the drug trade has clouded the victim versus volition debate considerably.

In sum, accounts of women's involvement in drug trafficking are underpinned by a set of binary categories which is gendered: male/female; trafficker/mule; agent/victim; greed/need, victimiser/victimised; powerful/powerless; top/bottom; rational/social. These binaries are ingrained, unquestioned and have perpetuated a conceptualisation of the business and consequential theorisation of women's involvement that is truncated.

Thus, in order to understand women's mules' participation, it is necessary to go beyond seeing structure and agency as 'ontological binary positions' (Maher 1997: 200).

This means working in the:

'space between the twin discourses of victimisation and volition that inform current understandings of women's [...] lawbreaking. While this space must be large enough to include the constraints of sexism, racism and poverty that structure women's lives, it cannot be so big as to overwhelm the active, creative and often contradictory choices, adaptations and resistances that constitute women's agencies.' (Maher 1997:201).

To work in the space between victimisation and volition, this research adopts the theoretical lens of the structured action approach. This is discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 3: THEORISING WOMEN AND DRUG TRAFFICKING: BEYOND STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

## Introduction: Beyond dualisms, the structured action approach

The previous chapter demonstrated that contemporary accounts of women in the drug trade have been underpinned by static and dualistic conceptions of male/female, action/passivity and agency/structure. This has contributed to a simplistic understanding of women's involvement in the drug trade. This research aims to move beyond these dualisms by theoretically grounding this research in the 'structured action approach'. The concept of structure action 'provides a means of bridging the agency/structure divide in a way that allows theorists to go beyond constructing women (and men) as simply passive victims of structural conditions. [...] specifically, recognizing gender as a situated action allows for recognition of agency, but does so in a way thoroughly grounded in the contexts of structural inequalities such as those of gender, sexuality, race, class and age' (Miller 2002: 434).

In the first part of the chapter I examine Messerschmidt's theory of structured action, next I examine Miller's critique and reconceptualisation of his theory and lastly I consider the implications for the structured action approach in the context of globalisation.

## **Social structure; structured action**

'Structure is one of the most important and most elusive terms in the vocabulary of current social science' (Sewell 1992: 1) yet the meaning and use of the notion of structure has varied considerably (Daly 1997).

The term 'structure' in this thesis comes from the structured action approach in which: 'social structure is both the medium and the outcome of social practices which constitute social systems' (Giddens cited by Sewell 1992: 4). The idea that structures are constituted through action and that social structure constitutes action is at the centre of the structured action approach.

Connell explains: 'structure exists in (and only in) personal practices. As the same time, personal practice does not float free of structure but is always grounded in the structures in play at a given time and place.' (1993: ix). Agency and structure are therefore mutually constitutive rather than separable opposites. The interplay between individual and social structure is a circular process whereby the individual is both constrained by structure and is simultaneously the producer of it: 'structure is not external to the agent, nor is it simply and solely constraining [...] Structure is implicated in social action and social action

is implicated in structure so that structure both constrains and enables social action' (Messerschmidt 1993: 77). This in turn leads to a conception of structure that is neither dualistic nor static. It also remains open to the possibility that individual action may contribute to structural change.

Although the individual plays an important role in creating and reproducing social structures, they cannot act outside of social structures which shape the kinds of actions which are plausible and possible: 'specific social groups possess, or are restricted from access to, material resources, a situation that places them in an unequal social relation to other groups. Material resources help construct social structural relations of power by gender, race and class' (Messerschmidt 1997:7). However, material resources are not the only way in which action is constrained by social structures. Social structures also operate at a deep level; they 'organise the way individuals think about their circumstance and generate methods for dealing with them' (Messerschmidt 1993: 77). Lastly, successful enactment of gender relies on the performance being received as valid or legitimate by others. West and Zimmerman emphasise how actors form their actions with an audience in mind and that this plays an important role in 'structuring' action. They term this accountability (1987: 135).

A final important aspect of the structured action approach is that social structures are contingent on each other: 'we must comprehend how gender, race and class are part of all social existence and not view each relation as extrinsic to the others.' (Messerschmidt 2005: 16 cited by Miller 2002: 446-7). This research includes a number of social structures: gender (which will be examined in detail below), class, nation, ethnicity, generation, sexuality and so on. Furthermore structured action is also dependent on context and is situationally specific.

## **Gender and structured action**

Gender is one of the most prominent social structures in this thesis. It is also one well theorised in the structured action tradition. Nonetheless, the term gender remains contested; it is used differently by different theorists who emphasise different aspects such as the material, discursive, performative, cultural, historical or material aspects (Butler 1990; Connell 2002; Jackson and Scott 2002; McNay 2000; Skeggs 1997; West and Zimmerman 1987). Accordingly, 'gender' has been used in a variety of ways in relation to criminological theory (Daly 1997; Messerschmidt 1995).

In the structured action paradigm gender is 'much more than a role or an individual characteristic' (Connell 1993: ix). Messerschmidt adopted the structured action approach as

a way to explicitly move away from conceptions of gender in criminology as a static, binary structure that was settled before action. He was writing against a paradigm which saw 'criminal behaviour as an expression of masculinity: thinking that the person's gender is logically prior to the behaviour, already settled and can be understood as the behaviour's cause' (Connell 1993: x). Furthermore, an important element of the structured action approach is that gender is always co-constituted by a number of other social factors. Accordingly, it cannot be understood in isolation. Since it is always co-constituted, gender is not binary, but multiple. Gender is never fixed, but always being 'done': it cannot be said to exist before action but is constituted in it. Since social structures shape what performances are available (both through access to available resources and discursive limitations on meaningful action) 'the performance of gender is both an indication of and a reproduction of gendered [...] social hierarchies' (Miller 2002: 434).

The structured action approach is focussed on gender at the level of interaction as outlined above. It is also useful to keep in mind that there are multiple layers of gender structures which exist at the level of interaction and the large scale. In *Gender and Power*, Connell offers a 'structural inventory' of different scales of gender structures which are interrelated (1987). First there is the level of interaction (gender relations), next there is the intermediate level of gender 'regimes' (patterns of gender relations in smaller settings or particular institutions), lastly she sees that gender structures operate at the large scale which she titles the gender order (for example formalised in institutions and social practices) (1987: chapter 6). These 'levels' of the gender order are interrelated: gendered relationships shape (and are shaped by) society-wide gender structures such as marriage.

### **Structured action: Messerschmidt on masculinities and crime**

James Messerschmidt introduced the structured action approach to criminology (1993; 1995; 1997). His approach has been influential in the study of masculinities and crime and has been applied to empirical studies of men in the night time economy (Winlow 2001) and street life (Mullins 2006) and has inspired collections which engage with masculinities and crime (Bowker 1998; Newburn and Stanko 1995).

Messerschmidt contends that masculinity is a 'situated accomplishment' and that: 'crime is a resource that may be summoned when men lack other resources to accomplish gender' (1993: 85). Using the example of shop floor theft, he argues that for men this provides an opportunity to 'symbolically liberate himself from the 'bullshit' by 'beating the system' (Messerschmidt 1993: 128). There is a clear link to Merton's strain theory (1968).



Merton claimed that where legitimate opportunities were blocked, the (male) offender would seek fulfilment elsewhere, or by using illegitimate means. Messerschmidt contends that crime is one such resource for accomplishing masculinity (1997).

Whilst accomplishing masculinity is subject to the specificities of each situation, the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987) underpins Messerschmidt's explanation of what it is to 'do' masculinity. Messerschmidt and Connell see hegemonic masculinity as embodying the qualities of accomplished male gender: the kind that is honoured and attracts status. It is 'embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare taxation policies and so forth' (Connell 1987: 184). Nonetheless, individual practices of masculinities may not resemble hegemonic masculinity since 'masculinity and femininity are based on social constructs that reflect unique circumstances and relationships with others' (Messerschmidt 1997: 12).

On a final note, Messerschmidt's theory has often been read as an explanation for gender *disparities* in offending. Since men could 'do masculinity;' by doing crime (but women could not) this was read as an explanation for gender differences in offending rates (see Miller 2002: 436). Importantly though, the structured action approach adopted by Messerschmidt was intended as a way to move beyond seeing gender as a binary category of difference. It is this quality of the approach which Miller develops.

### **Structured action: Miller's critique of Messerschmidt on femininities and crime**

In contrast to the enthusiastic take up of Messerschmidt's theories of masculinities and crime, the field of 'femininities' and crime has not experienced the same mushrooming of research. Jody Miller has explored the potential of the structured action approach in relation to women's offending. Her empirical research has focussed on young women in gangs (2001, 2002) and more recently on young black women's experiences of gendered violence (2008).

In *The strengths and limits of 'doing gender' for understanding street crime* (2002) she offers a critique and refinement of Messerschmidt's theory. This is the theoretical starting point for this thesis.

First she shows that the relationship between masculinities and crime is radically different to that between femininities and crime. Men can 'do' crime as a way to accomplish masculinity since 'the dividing line between what is masculine and what is criminal is at times a thin one' (Messerschmidt 1993: 27). However 'there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men'

(Connell 1987: 183). Furthermore, the relationship between femininity and crime is marked by stigma: 'crime is almost always stigmatised for females' (Steffensmeier and Allen 1996: 476). This differential positioning in relation to crime and stigma radically affects how crime can be used to 'accomplish' gender in the case of women's offending. Given the asymmetrical relationships between masculinities and femininities and crime Messerschmidt's theory cannot simply be transplanted from men to women as if masculinity and femininity were two sides of the same coin (2002).

Secondly, Miller points out that Messerschmidt's analysis falls back on binary concepts of sex, rather than moving beyond them as he intended. Since everything that men do is 'masculine' and everything women do is 'feminine' 'the concept of masculine is an empty tautology: gender collapses into sex' (Hood-Williams 2001: 45 cited by Miller 2002: 439). As a result gender structures become reified and potential to account for agency is reduced. As a result, his version of the structured action 'does not allow for individual's reinterpretation of, resistance to, or subversion of culturally appropriated patterns' (Miller 2000: 438).

Miller suggests that this reification can be avoided by disentangling biological sex and gender and allowing for the possibility that gender crossing can occur. She shows that women can successfully 'do' masculinities. She quotes one respondent:

We just like dudes to them [male gang members]. We just like dudes, they treat us like that cause we act so much like dudes they can't do nothing. They respect us as females though, but we just act so much like dudes that they just don't trip off it. (Miller 2002: 446).

Thus, Miller's reconceptualisation of structured action theory opens up theoretical space to account for agency and resistance to gender categories.

Miller next criticism is that Messerschmidt gives primacy to 'normative aspects of gendered action'. Conversely, Miller shows that social actors may purposefully 'do' non-normative femininities or masculinities intentionally and decisively. For example, the quote above demonstrates that women 'do' masculinity as way of self protection, positive identity and a way to access schemas of self-determination.

Lastly, Miller criticises Messerschmidt for over-extending the importance of accomplishing gender as a goal of action. She contends that 'it is problematic to argue that women engage in street-level sex work as a means of constructing a feminine identity, particularly given the dangers and stigma attached to such activities (2002: 449). Rather, she contends that 'gender narrows those options available to women on the streets, making sex work one of the few income generating activities open to women in certain contexts' (ibid).

The example of prostitution illustrates that (criminal) action may not be about accomplishing gender. It also illustrates that ‘doing femininity’ does not accord the ‘doer’ with the same status and power that doing masculinity does. This returns to her point about how Messerschmidt fails to account for asymmetries of power in his analysis and therefore misses the possibility of ‘gender crossing’.

In spite of the weaknesses which Miller exposes, she contends that the structured approach nonetheless may be useful for comprehending women’s experiences as offenders in a way that avoids the dichotomies of structure/action and male/female. Thus, in order for Messerschmidt’s theory to adequately register women’s experiences as criminals, some adjustments to structured action theory must be made.

### **Miller’s development of structured action theory**

Miller’s development of the structured action approach is driven by a need to adequately theorise structure/agency and gender without reifying them, or relying on binary conceptions. In the last chapter I showed that in order to be able to ‘see’ women’s agency as drug traffickers, a better conceptualisation of the relationships between structure, agency and gender is needed. Miller offers a promising reconceptualisation of structured action approach which guides this research.

### **Structure**

Miller proposes that a broader, yet more precise conception of structure is needed. She points to Sewell’s article *A theory of structure: duality, agency and transformation* as a useful resource for the refinement of structure (1992). In particular, the concept of schemas may be useful.

Sewell’s concept of social structures is a critique and development of Giddens’ theory of structuration (1984). He contends that structures exist at a deep level: ‘structures are not the patterned social practices that make up social systems, but the principles that pattern these practices. Structures, therefore, have only [...] a virtual existence.’ (Sewell 1992: 6). Sewell calls these ‘schemas’. He contends that schemas exist at multiple levels of social action – not only at the ‘deep’ level proposed by Giddens. He contends that structures ‘should be thought of as including all the varieties of cultural schemas that anthropologists can uncover in their research. Not only the array of binary opposites that make up a given societies fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action and habits of speech and gesture built up from these fundamental tools. (Sewell 1992: 7).

Although schemas are virtual, they come into being through use: by social actors to construct appropriate identities, through social interaction and through social institutions. The enactment of these schemas is reliant on having the resources to do so and the legitimation of this enactment by others (echoing West and Zimmerman 1987).

### **Structures as multiple and varied**

Structured action emphasises that structures are co-constituted, contingent and situationally specific. In contrast to previous research, this thesis will consider how other structures – such as ethnicity, nationality, kin, generation and so on – shape opportunities for women’s participation in drug trafficking. Furthermore, this research will consider how these structures are contingent on each other.

This research will explore if and how gender regimes are reproduced or reconfigured in the context of the drugs trade. It will explore if drug trafficking is shaped by gendered structures or hierarchies; if they are organised along kin, ethnic or other social structures. It will examine whether the distribution of labour mirror that of the licit world.

### **Schemas**

This thesis examines how women employ schemas as a way to enact agency. This may be particularly salient where an individual is acting outside of their usual social milieu (for example when the mule travels abroad to work). It will explore how and which schemas women enact as motive for participation in the drug trade; and will examine what motives women can enact while working in the drugs industry to invoke and enact individual agency.

### **Multiple structures; conceptualising agency**

This research will look at if and how contingent social structures shape women’s involvement broadly through providing context, opportunity and meaning for women’s participation in the drug trade. Although social structures are a context for opportunity and meaning of action, they are not– in themselves – catalysts for action. Thus, understanding how women navigate social structures are motivated (or not) is key to seeing women’s agency in the context of criss-crossing social structures which may provide competing pathways for action.

### **Agency**

‘The term agency [...] has maintained an elusive albeit resonant vagueness’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). Researching agency may benefit from ‘a more precise

and varied account of agency' (McNay 2000: 4 cited by Miller 2002: 450). This is particularly so in the present study since prior studies of women's participation as drug mules has been hampered by inability to 'see' agency.

Rather than approaching structure/agency, victimisation/volition as binary opposites, this research will explore how these categories may exist simultaneously, or may characterise different stages of women's experiences in mule-work. Miller points to Emirbayer and Mische's account of agency as a way to disaggregate agency (1998). They contend that agency is made up of 3 elements which are discussed below, however, central to their contribution is:

'to reconceptualise human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual element), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time.' (1998: 963).

#### **Agency as iterative practice or habit**

One dimension of agency is its iterative character (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This element of agency is well theorised – usually conceived of as the kind of social practices that are deeply embedded, taken for granted: 'habitual, unreflected and mostly unproblematic patterns of action by means of which we orient our efforts in the greater part of our daily lives.' (1998: 971). It is this element of agency which reinforces social structures and gives them the appearance of stability. As such, this research must be open to how action may take the form of habitual practice and may not disrupt existing social practices.

This research will explore how women's participation may be a result of habitual practices from gendered roles, position in the family, relationships or possibly previous involvement in crime. It will also examine how practices of habit (such as relationships or experience working in the illegal economy) may shape women's experiences working within the drug business and in particular how practices of habit create or preclude opportunities for action.

#### **Agency as projection towards a goal**

A second element of agency is its projective element (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This encompasses the 'imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actor's hopes fears and desires for the future.' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 971). The

actor's ability to conceive of alternative plans of action is dependent on access to 'cultural competences' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 981). Sewell similarly writes about cultural competences:

'Agency is formed by a specific range of cultural schemas or resources in a person's particular social milieu... What kinds of desires people can have, what intentions they can form and what sort of creative transpositions they can carry out vary dramatically from one social world to another depending on the nature of the particular social structures that inform those social worlds. Occupancy of different social positions – as defined for example by gender, wealth, social prestige, class, ethnicity, occupation, generation, sexual preference, or education – gives people knowledge of different schemas and access to different kinds and amounts of resources and hence different possibilities for transformative action.' (Sewell 1992: 20-21).

Again, enacting schemas may not appear as change but may be continuation of existing social practices. However, an individual's capacity to imagine an outcome is also about the range of cultural competencies and schemas an individual has access to. Cultural competences and access to schemas is shaped by an individual's experiences and access to cultural meanings for actions. Globalisation is important here since technologies and travel may give access to a wider range of schemas than could have been imagined 30 years ago. Sewell also contends that ability to act depends on access to the material resources to bring about action as well as resources for legitimation.

This research will explore how women and men come upon the material opportunity of mule work. This research will be sensitive to how this is a product of existing structural positions – whether of gender, ethnicity, generation, nationality or kin. These may be co-constitutive and potentially very varied. For example the meaning of kin networks takes on particular meanings in different ethnic/national contexts. As mules travel to Ecuador to pick up the drugs, they move physically from one sphere to another: this may create opportunities for transposing schemas. Less optimistically, this may radically affect their access to the resources to enact schemas as well as an audience which accepts actions as legitimate.

### **Agency as evaluation**

This final aspect of agency encompasses decision making and describes the 'capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 971). Emirbayer and Mische highlight the social and relational aspects of decision making in contrast to classicist notions of rationality. Furthermore, they highlight that much decision making blends

indiscriminately into the flow of activity (or emergent events) and is only clearly perceived after the fact (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 999).

This research will explore how women evaluate and decide to participate in drug trafficking. It will explore both rational and relational components: how structures and experience shape the available information as well as the role of 'schemas' in making sense of the current situation by relating to other known situations.

## **Time**

Time is an important dimension of agency. Appreciating the role of the past (as structural position), projection of future and the contingencies of present are important to understand the way in which agency is constructed through action. Importantly though, time can be experienced as a perpetual flow of emergent acts rather than a sequence of discrete stages (1998: 999). These distinctions between past and present may be only visible in retrospect (for example in an interview situation).

Importantly Emirbayer and Mische highlight the importance of the 'present' as a contingency of structures which act as a catalyst for action. In addition though, contexts are also important. Miller highlights the relevance of the 'forefronts of crime' (2002). Life events such as the death, illness or separation from a loved one may be equally important in the contingencies of the present although they are not social structures (although valid ways of responding to these situations are shaped by social structures). This research therefore remains open to the importance of such contingencies in shaping opportunities and obligations for action.

## **The importance of time in perceiving agency**

Previous accounts of women in the drug trade have focussed only on women's motive for working as a mule. Focussing on this single moment in the process has produced a two dimensional picture of women's agency and involvement in drug trafficking. Rather than asking *if* women are either victims or agents, this research will explore *how* victimisation or agency are constructed, enacted or imposed over a period of time. Where prior research has seen the relationship between gender/power as fixed, this research seeks to comprehend the ebb and flow of opportunity and coercion, victimisation and choice in women's experiences of joining and working in the drug trade.

This research will therefore explore women's understandings and interpretations of their own victimisation and volition in their narrative constructions of their involvement in drug trafficking. Interpretation is not straightforward: 'the fact that people do not necessarily

see themselves as victims of domination does not in itself constitute proof of its absence’ (Maher 1997; 202).

## **Gender**

Miller builds on earlier reconceptualisation of gender by structured action theorists (such as West and Zimmerman 1987). She contends that a broader view of gender is necessary to comprehend the role of gender in women’s lives.

### **Intersectionalities: gender as multiple**

As outlined above this research approaches gender as one of many social structures which are interwoven and which shape women’s lives. Gender is contingent, multiple and fractured. This research will therefore seek to understand the ways in which gender is ‘situational’ or co-constituted in respondents’ accounts. It will explore the relation between respondents’ motives for action to the schemas which result from particular contingencies of place, gender, generation and so on.

### **Gender not sex**

To avoid reifying gender structures Miller disentangles schemas of masculinities and femininities from biological sex. This is necessary to appreciate non-normative aspects of gender. Thus, this research will explore respondents own interpretation of the gendering (or otherwise) of their actions.

### **Beyond normative conceptions of female gender**

Prior research has ‘seen’ women in only very limited roles of femininity stemming from women’s traditional place in the family. The ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis has appreciated only very conventional forms of femininity as valid explanations and accordingly alternative explanations such as excitement, thrill, travel or even the goal of financial betterment (out with familial responsibility) have before not been considered valid hypotheses in previous empirical studies of female mules.

### **Gender as one social structure of many**

Although gender may be the most salient feature of action, it may not always be (Miller 2002). This research is ostensibly about women; nonetheless this research incorporates data from both male and female mules. This is not to explore gender difference



(which would be based on a conception of gender as binary) but rather to reveal the importance of other structures through similarities with male mules: such as generation, age, class, ethnicity and so on.

By including men as well as women, this research is better able to untangle the relationship between gender and victimisation in mule-work. Thus, this research seeks to explore men's experiences as drug mules and how these may be similar (or different) to women's experiences. Lastly, this research uses narrative methods to try and understand events from the perspective of respondents to avoid imposing gender binaries or distinctions where there may be none and to avoid overemphasising the salience of gender in respondents' experiences. This is discussed further in the methodology chapter.

### **Theorising in the global context**

In chapter 1, I showed that the context of this research is the globalised social. 'Seeing' individuals in the context of the global social (rather than a globalised local milieu) is a challenge which has not been adequately tackled by social theorists: in *Global Ethnography* Burawoy highlights how different conceptualisations of the global have made it difficult to 'see' the experiences of individuals in such global flows (2000:2). Thus, researching outside the boundaries of culture, community or nation presents a challenge to contemporary theoretical perspectives which have assumed the primacy of local contexts or situated meanings to interpret action:

'One of the great social interactionist insights of the last century – that meaning resides not in the thing itself but in surrounding social and cultural processes – takes on even greater complexity and importance in a world where mass produced symbols now circulate endlessly amidst the situated experiences of everyday life. (Ferrell 2006: 270 cited by Young 2007: 2).

This thesis will therefore consider how meaning is constructed in social milieu which are globalised and may derive meaning from social structures not limited to place. Furthermore, researching social action in the context of drug trafficking (a phenomenon which is not limited to a single place) demands a consideration of how social structures and social action are constituted.

This thesis follows men and women through the physical journey of working as a mule. Their story starts in a (globalised) local. In order to do their job as a mule they travel to Ecuador. This research will follow their journey from the local, along global 'flows': from globalised local, to localised global. This research will explore the implications for

theorising structure, agency and gender posed by the transnational movement of respondents as drug mules.

### **Implications for theorising structure and agency**

There is a dearth of empirical research exploring the question of how structure and agency are constituted in the global context. Nonetheless, globalisation theorists have frequently contended that globalisation create opportunities for the ‘freeing’ of agency from structure (Adkins 2002: 4). Nonetheless, such accounts have often neglected the significance of the local: ‘that global imaginations have emancipated themselves from the nation state and that the cultural is rapidly disconnecting from the nation state [...] should not blind us to the latter’s continuing influence in the realm of forces and connections.’ (Appadurai cited by Burawoy 2000: 35).

The question of how structure and agency are enacted, constructed and performed in a global context are not well theorised. Sewell’s concept of structure is perhaps the best able to conceive of the complexities of the global and local in the action of individuals through the concept of flows. Since these are virtual one can begin to imagine how they are constituted beyond local contexts. Thus, this thesis will explore (using empirical evidence) how the ‘agent’ is constituted by social structures and how agency is enacted in the context of the networks and flows (as multiple and criss-crossing) of trafficking.

Nonetheless, it is important not to lose sight of the local. Thus this research will explore how social structures (and schemas) might be tied to one place, but enacted in another. This brings up questions about the enactment of schemas and in particular the question of resources. This research will explore whether individuals rely on local resources, resources that travel with the individual (for example the gendered body) and the ‘virtual’ use of resources (i.e. at a distance). Lastly, enactment of schemas may rely on resources for legitimation. This research will explore the relationship between the agent and the audience: are they local or distant, present or virtual.

Thus, theoretical possibilities to appreciate the dialectic between the global (globalised flows of information which potentially create endless numbers of schemas for action) and the local (as limited resources of action; sources of legitimation) begin to emerge.

On a final note, this research uses terms such as gender, class, ethnicity and so on to indicate different social divisions. The meaning of these terms is highly dependent on place, for example the term ‘woman’ means nothing unless it is embedded in its local context.

There is no universal 'woman' who is not located in class, ethnicity, racial and regional contexts (hooks 1982). Similarly, class, ethnicity, poverty/deprivation, generation and so on mean very different things in different contexts. So different are these meanings that concepts become unstable and problematic. There is no simple solution to this. As far as possible I have tried to indicate that I use these terms critically.

### **Globalisation: implications for theorising gender**

Gender is usually understood as culturally and nationally specific; this research moves beyond these neat boundaries to consider gender in the context of globalisation. Gender has many effects: it shapes social structures (as gender relations, regime and role) and also plays an important role in identity (Connell 1993). Travelling outside of one's usual social milieu and one's national boundaries may create opportunities to free oneself of the confines of social structures and create opportunities for invention and performance of gender that were previously inconceivable: 'people are being released from constraints of gender... men and women are released from traditional forms and ascribed roles.' (Beck 1999a: 135 cited by Adkins 2002: 4). Nonetheless, Adkins sees not a 'freeing' from structure, but new opportunities for the reconfiguration of gender roles and regimes in the context of global 'flows' (2002: 6).

This thesis will therefore examine what happens when mules move outside of their usual social cultural milieu. It will explore if and how this creates new opportunities for invention and action of gendered roles, relations and identity.

Lastly, Young contends that identity has taken on a new salience in an increasingly globalised world: 'culture and norms become loosened from their moorings in time and place: normative borders shift, blur, overlap, detach... All this creates great potentialities for human flexibility and reinvention... At no stage in history has there been such a premium on identity, on constructing a narrative of development and discovery, yet where materials to construct it are so transient and insubstantial.' (Young 2007: 3; see also Burawoy 2000: 347). The importance of identity in late modernity has implications for understanding and interpreting narrative of self in the globalised milieu of prison and/or vocabularies of motive which are verbalised there (Wright Mills 1940).

## **Chapter conclusion: Theorising gender and mule-work: beyond victimisation and volition**

In sum, this research will go beyond previous studies of women in drug trafficking by moving beyond simple dualisms of victimisation/volition, female/male, mule/trafficker which have been fundamental to shaping macro conceptions of the drugs business as well as the micro-level studies of those who inhabit it. The structured action approach has been adopted because it moves beyond dualistic conceptions of structure/agency and gender.

This research explores women's involvement in drug trafficking in new ways. Whereas previous studies of women traffickers have focussed on women's recruitment into drug trafficking, this research researches the wider circumstances which surround their recruitment and consequential participation in the drug trade. Rather asking *why* women are involved in trafficking, this research first seeks to explore *how*. This research seeks to explore a number of aspects of women's involvement in trafficking with the aim to addressing the over-arching question of whether women who traffic drugs are victims, agents or perhaps both.

## **CHAPTER 4: IMAGINING PRISON: POLITICAL FRONTIER; NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE**

### **Introduction: contextualising the research**

The research for this thesis was conducted in prisons in Ecuador. This chapter describes and contextualises the research in two ways. The first section describes prisons in relation to globalised networks of anti-drug politics and drug trafficking: I contend that prisons in Quito are a global ‘hub’ where various networks of trafficking and politics meet and intertwine.

The second section describes the contexts in which interview data was constructed: it describes the ‘narrative landscape’ of prison, as a cultural matrix of meaningful ways of narrating one’s involvement in trafficking and imprisonment. I describe the multiple, intertwining gendered narratives of being a prisoner/trafficker that are formed publicly and privately, collectively and individually.

Prisons in Latin America are distinct from those which have been the traditional subjects of western academia. The culture surrounding prisons in Ecuador is distinct from those in the west: they are neither Goffman-esque total institutions (Nuñez V. 2007), nor are they Foucaultian panopticons (Pontón 2005). Furthermore, prisons in Ecuador have been profoundly shaped by their relation to the ‘War on Drugs’. Ecuador’s proximity to drug producing countries Colombia (to the north) and Peru (to the South) has meant that Ecuador has been involved in ‘Drug War’ politics and policies. Since not much is widely known about Ecuador or its place in international politics, it is worth describing here to show how the context has shaped this research project.

### **The place of prisons in Ecuador in international anti-drug politics**

Prisons in Ecuador (like those in Latin America and wherever the ‘War on Drugs’ is conducted) exist at a frontier between drug trafficking industries and drug enforcement efforts. That imprisonment should follow arrest for the serious crime of drug trafficking is widely understood to be logical (Sudbury 2002) and indisputable where traffickers are presented as threats to the fabric of decent society (as I described in chapter 1).

In contrast though, female drug traffickers are frequently described as a ‘by product of the anti-trafficker push’ (Dorn et al. 1992: 189) or as ‘collateral damage’ (Edwards 2003 and Youngers 2005, see also Carvel 1990 and Harper et al. 2000). Here I contend that the

numbers of low-level drug offenders (many of which are mules) in prisons are a direct and intended consequence of current enforcement of anti-drug politics and policies.

Those countries which set the drug agenda internationally (particularly the United States of America and the United Kingdom) have deployed large amount of funds, expertise, equipment and aid to developing countries where drugs are produced. From employing 'private military contractors' to conduct crop dusting (Scahill 2007, 1st August)<sup>5</sup>, installing military bases (Edwards 2007) to exporting drug detection technologies to airports in producer/exporter countries (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2007; Sturcke 2007, 12th July), the 'War on Drugs' is characterised by a literal exportation of criminal justice politics and policies. Ecuador is one of many sites of exported justice worldwide.

### **Ionscan machines: drug mules as intended targets**

Most recently, this exportation of justice is embodied by 'Ionscan' machines which detect minute quantities of drugs in luggage and people in airports. According to an online report by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK:

**Cost benefit analysis: Benefits exceed costs of Ionscan:**

**Details:** Ionscan technology can be used to identify minute traces of Class A drugs (cocaine and heroin). Together with HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and foreign law-enforcement partners, we have deployed several sets of this equipment overseas to detect drugs smugglers. The decision on where to place the equipment is based on intelligence we receive from the countries which are traditionally the source for the largest number of seizures at UK ports.

**Cost:** The cost of the equipment and related training was about £65,000 for each unit.

**Benefit:** In 2002, HMRC picked up 1,000 'swallowers', who had swallowed cocaine while travelling from Jamaica to the UK. Within four years, the number had fallen to five. The on-going savings to the UK in police, prison and court costs have been estimated at £130 million a year and 70 years of staff time. We have recently deployed similar technology to Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan and to Accra in Ghana.

(Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2007, my emphasis).

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<sup>5</sup> 'In Latin America, the massive US firm DynCorp [private military contractor] is operating in Colombia, Bolivia and other countries as part of the "war on drugs" - US defence contractors are receiving nearly half the \$630m in US military aid for Colombia". This fee is primarily for DynCorp's role in the controversial crop dusting program.' (Scahill 2007).

Whilst the introduction of Ionscan machines produced a decrease in the number of traffickers arrested in the UK (and thereby represents a saving to the UK taxpayer), it also produced an immediate rise in arrests in the country in which the equipment was placed:

In the first year of operation the JCF [Jamaican Constabulary Force] detected more swallows than ever before heading for the UK (from 82 to 216) and detections at UK airports saw a rapid decline (from 822 to 185). *During the last twelve months, the numbers of swallows detected at UK airports has reduced to just five and a similar impact has been achieved in Jamaica.* The savings to the UK taxpayer are about £130m per annum at a cost of £250,000.” (Whitehall and Westminster World: Civil Service Network 2007, my emphasis).

Whilst placing the scan machine in Jamaica resulted in a long term reduction in the numbers of mules caught in *both* Jamaica and the UK, it is widely recognised that cocaine is now being transported via Ghana instead. Supply has not been halted, but diverted. Accordingly, there is now a similar ‘Ionscan’ machine in Ghana (FCO 2007).

### **Ecuador as a site of exported justice**

The USA exports Ionscan machines and training to South and Latin America, including Ecuador (USA Department of State 2007). The deployment of such technologies to airports deliberately targets small-scale drug traffickers including mules. Furthermore, international agreements encourage a ‘logic of quantification’ whereby numbers of offenders are required to meet internationally set targets:

The USA continues to monitor Ecuador’s commitment/obligation [*el compromiso*] of Ecuador in the anti-drug fight. Proof of this is that in 2005 they signed a bilateral agreement which stipulated that for an investment of \$15.7 million in the security of the country, they demanded a 12% increase in the capturing and processing of narco-traffickers and a 10% increase in the capture of drugs in relation to the year 2004. (Pontón and Torres 2007: 64, my translation).<sup>6</sup>

This agreement explicitly targets and criminalises not only drugs but people. Importantly, Ecuador’s cooperation in anti-drug politics has significant political implications for international relations including trade and aid agreements.

Whilst the USA and UK also fund operations targeted at larger scale operations (such as increasing surveillance in shipping containers) such efforts inevitably yield lower numbers of arrests compared to the investment involved. In the context of the bilateral treaty above, it is easy to see why local interdiction efforts are aimed at collecting large numbers of small-scale drug traffickers.

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<sup>6</sup> These same figures can also be seen at (USA Department of State 2007).

Furthermore in Ecuador, numbers of arrests are frequently augmented by large numbers of drug offenders: not only drug mules but also street dealers and users (even though drug use was decriminalised in 1998) (Pontón and Torres 2007: 63, footnote). All offenders are charged and tried under the same law (Law 108) and are similarly sentenced to 8-12 years<sup>7</sup>. In sum, this prison is part of a trans-national process (and international trend) of exporting anti-drug politics and policies. Importation of these politics has had profound effects on the Ecuadorian prison population and criminal justice system.

## **The effects of exporting justice**

### *Rise in prison population and overcrowding*

Since the 1990's prison populations in Ecuador (and across Latin America) have soared as a result of anti-drug policies across the region (Pontón and Durán 2007). A significant percentage of inmates in Quito are accused of, or sentenced for drug offences: 76% of women and 28% of men<sup>8</sup> (Nuñez and Gallardo 2006: 8). According to a survey of the women's prison: '16.4% of all inmates said that they had been involved in international trafficking of drugs, 13.4% for trafficking at a regional/national level and 13.1% said they had been detained for consumption of drugs (in spite of the decriminalization of consumption since 1998).' (Pontón and Torres 2007: 67, my translation). Overall 10% of those serving sentences for drug crime in Ecuador are women (Ibid: 66).

The recent increase in the numbers of prisoners far exceeds the capacity and resources of the National Direction for Prisons (DNRS)<sup>9</sup>. Overcrowding is chronic and reached a critical level during fieldwork<sup>10</sup>. This was product of not only an increase in arrests but also longer sentences for those sentenced for drug crimes. In Ecuador, sentences were effectively doubled in 2002 when the '2 for 1' system (whereby prisoners were released halfway through their sentence) was stopped (DNRS 2005 cited by Pontón and Torres 2007). An average sentence for a drug conviction is now 8-12 years. Furthermore, the unconstitutional use of 'detención en firme' (detaining remand prisoners for unconstitutional

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<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic observation and conversations with offenders in prison reveals clear racial trends. In both the men's and women's prisons there were large numbers of drug users in prison. This group was composed of overwhelmingly poor (and largely black) *basuco* (see Inciardi 1987) users who were periodically arrested in the street and are unable to pay for their legal defence.

<sup>8</sup> To reiterate, Law 108 does not differentiate between international trafficking and low level drug crimes.

<sup>9</sup> In Spanish: Dirección Nacional de Rehabilitación Social.

<sup>10</sup> In 1998, the official capacity was 5,341 although the actual population was almost double: 9,439 (Nuñez and Gallardo 2006). By 2004 it had reached 11,358 (Pontón and Torres 2007: 65). In 2006, the prison population was allegedly over 12,000.



periods of time, sometimes up to three years)<sup>11</sup> has also augmented the prison population considerably (Flores Aguirre 2007).

A significant proportion of those arrested for drug offences are foreign nationals: in the men's prison around a third are foreigners (Nuñez 2007); in the women's prison, 36% are foreign nationals (Nuñez and Gallardo 2006: 25). Almost all foreigners are arrested for drug trafficking offences. Historically, this represents a significant change in the profile of female crime in Ecuador. In the 1980's, only 17% of the female prison population were sentenced for drug crimes compared to 76% currently (Pontón and Torres 2007: 64).

### *Prison conditions*

Those nations which dictate drug war politics (in Ecuador this is primarily the United States) dedicate no funds or expertise towards processing, fairly trying, sentencing and housing those arrested in Ecuador for drug trafficking offences (Edwards 2003; Youngers and Rosin 2005). Prison conditions in Ecuador do not meet minimum international standards (Knotzer, et al. 1995). I offer a detailed description of prisons in Ecuador elsewhere (Fleetwood 2007).

Overcrowding worsens the shortage of resources: physical space in the prison, food, healthcare, rehabilitation and education (Nuñez and Gallardo 2006). Provision of healthcare is inadequate. Many inmates were unnecessarily ill or died due to inadequate provision of sanitary conditions, doctors and medicine. One respondent died in prison after a long period of suffering due to inadequate health provision. Parole was introduced during fieldwork: initially it was available to a small minority of inmates who were able to organise references, a job and accommodation from prison.

The number of guards working in the prisons is inadequate for the number of inmates. Although armed guards patrolled the perimeter walls and roof of the prison, there were rarely more than five guards inside the prison at any time (see Herrera 2005). The level of violence among inmates was high<sup>12</sup>. Institutionalised violence is an established part of prison culture in Ecuador: 'torture is an institutionalised practice in prisons: abuse of authority for example physical and psychological abuse by guards towards inmates is habitual' (Nuñez and Gallardo 2006: 7)<sup>13</sup>.

### *Judicial process in Ecuador*

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<sup>11</sup> The constitutional limit is 6 months for serious offences including drugs, extortion, violent offences and rape, 3 months for non-serious offences.

<sup>12</sup> Violence in the men's prison was chronic: at its worst 3 inmates were murdered in one week.

<sup>13</sup> One inmate in the women's prison was subject to a brutal beating by the guards. This was witnessed by inmates who responded with violent protest.

Edwards (2003) offers a detailed account of the problems with judicial process in Ecuador. In summary, the volume of cases to be processed each year places immense pressure on courts and public defence lawyers. This pressure has severely affected the ability of the courts to function. Delays in processing cases are extremely long and violate the constitution. Furthermore, 'anti-corruption' measures have skewed the normal functioning of the court. Judges are under immense pressure to give a guilty verdict; lawyers risk their career by accepting drug trafficking cases. The level of proof of innocence required is so high that those accused of drug offences have to effectively prove their own innocence. In sum, the result is a court system which struggles to achieve minimum standards of due process of justice and principles including the assumption of innocence.

### **Prisons in Ecuador: site of globalised politics and exported justice**

Drug trafficking is a globalised crime which is opposed globally (even if the politics originate in a particular corner of the globe). Ecuador is one such site of globalised anti-drug efforts. The population of prisons in Ecuador reflects the globalised nature of the drug trade. Inmates came from all over the world. Respondents were therefore recruited from all over the world and were not only Ecuadorians/Latin Americans.

The conditions in prison shaped the environment in which research took place. Overcrowding and a corrupted criminal justice system meant that respondents felt (justifiably) victimised by the law and politics. This played an important role in shaping prison discourse which is discussed in the second half of this chapter.

Lastly, recognising that drug mules are targets of the drug war is important. Current depictions of (women) drug mules as mere collateral damage relies on their status as victims rather than agents. This is a further example of how drug war discourse relies on gendered depictions of traffickers to allow for policies to be adopted (Green 1998).

### **The place of prison within drug trafficking**

Prison is a part of global drug trafficking networks. The globalised nature of prison shaped the kinds of data that could (and could not) be collected.

#### *Prison as a hub in global trafficking networks*

Worldwide drug policies are underpinned by the premise that arresting and imprisoning drug traffickers will stop individual traffickers from continuing to traffic drugs and that drug trafficking organisations will suffer as a consequence resulting in a reduction

in the quantities of drugs trafficked. It has been widely established that arresting drug traffickers has had little effect on the drug trade. My observations of traffickers in prison demonstrate that the former is not the case either. As such, prison should be considered a part of, rather than apart from drug trafficking networks.

It has long been acknowledged that drug distribution and dealing networks have connections to prison (more recently see Crewe 2006; Penfold, et al. 2005). Whilst high profile accounts of international trafficking from prison occasionally surface in the 'true grime' literature (for example see 'Marching Powder' (Young and McFadden 2003)) and in the press (McVeigh 2007, May 28th) such accounts tend to be short on details and long on scandal. Nonetheless, the prison complex in Quito is a particularly globalised locale, a global hub where multiple distinct drug trafficking networks overlap and intertwine. These networks are manifested physically in the international prison population in Quito, but these networks are also virtual: a variety of capitals (contacts, skills and knowledge) are shared and swapped in a global marketplace which sometimes precipitated further flows of drugs.

Nuñez notes that in the men's prison influx of cash from drug trafficking has had a transformative effect of the internal organisation of the prison (2007). Rather than fitting the classic 'delinquent' profile (poor, black, unemployed and uneducated), drug offenders are generally older, more educated and have access to greater material resources. Nuñez noted that those imprisoned for drug trafficking have little compunction about bribing guards whereas traditional 'delinquents' saw it as a betrayal. Such collaboration with authority also extends to the system of democratically elected committees who participate in the organisation and running of the prison (many of the members were imprisoned for drug trafficking crimes). Furthermore, where resources are scarce, the influx of (drug trafficking) cash into the prison has produced a booming informal economy in goods and labour. Even the organisation of the men's prison has become a market: in the richest wing of the men's prison, cells changed hands for many thousands of dollars<sup>14</sup>.

I saw and heard of international drug deals taking place in men's prison on several occasions. Large quantities of money from drug trafficking flow through the prison. Although many of those at the organisational end of 'organised crime' continue to run business from the 'inside' and continued to profit from it, those less connected (in auxiliary rather than organisation roles for example mule-work) often found themselves apparently abandoned by the people who had got them involved in drug trafficking. Although this was the case with men who were mules, this was particularly apparent in the women's prison

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<sup>14</sup> The price of a cell ranged from \$400 to \$4000. The high price reflects the volume of trafficking dollars which passed through the prison.

where a far greater portion claimed to be mules rather than traffickers. Nonetheless, even those mules who thought they had been abandoned found themselves being observed by other inmates who were connected to the same trafficking networks. These networks were sometimes used to exact revenge on mules who had allegedly passed information to the police after they were arrested. The women's prison was more subtly shaped by the influx of traffickers they were nonetheless present and powerful.

### *The place of prison in traffickers' careers*

Imprisonment plays an important role in shaping individual traffickers' careers. Many of the traffickers in this study were mules who were involved for the first time, however some (mainly men) had much longer careers in drug trafficking and had been in prison before. While they were in prison they diversified, developed contacts and changed their role in the business. Accordingly, prison can be understood as an important part of trafficking careers, rather than as a hiatus or exclusion from the 'real' trafficking. Prison is a site of information and knowledge exchange among those in the business: a place to increase one's knowledge, develop contacts and learn about different ways of running a successful exporting/importing operation, in short to gain the resources to diversify: change one's method, route, drug or contacts. No wonder some referred to prison as a 'college'.

As well as furthering their 'careers' from prison, some continued to traffic drugs from prison. Some contended that it was safer:

JF: what were you risking by getting involved?

In here? The money [he had invested his own cash together with another inmate]. You're not risking your freedom. They've already taken that away and it was pretty well set up so there was nothing leading back to us. So, no problem.  
(Graham, p.274).

Graham originally became involved in drug trafficking through an old school friend who was organising the transport of cocaine from prison in Ecuador. Ironically he got involved in drug trafficking again to raise funds to pay for a lawyer to process his paperwork for parole.

Although trafficking was a common topic of conversation in the men's prison it was uncommon to admit one's connection to the business in the women's prison. Nonetheless, although women uniformly claimed to be 'reformed', women almost always knew *someone* who had deepened their knowledge and widened their contacts during imprisonment.

For some, prison was a site of desistance from involvement in drug trafficking since it took them away from the contacts that had facilitated their involvement in the first place.

However these were people who were working in auxiliary, peripheral roles in drug trafficking and who had few links to trafficking networks. Many women inmates were abandoned by their contacts (who were also sometimes boyfriends, husbands or friends). This abandonment by partners was acutely felt; many felt deeply betrayed and saw no future in pursuing these relationships after prison.

### **Contextualising the research site and research subjects**

Previous attempts to research drug trafficking from prisons have approached the research site as if were static and located outside of trafficking networks. In contrast, ethnographic research and observation inside prison reveals that prison is not static, but a dynamic place characterised by international and global movement of people, information, contacts, business, drugs and money. Furthermore in this context, drug trafficking shaped prison culture and in particular what could and could not be talked about. This will be discussed in the next section. Furthermore, conducts (such as bribing authorities) are imported into prison from trafficking cultures. This creates opportunities to better understand how drug trafficking works, but this must also be taken into account in the methods of research adopted. This will be discussed further in the next chapter. Lastly, understanding how drug trafficking effects men's and women's prisons differently hints at women's and men's different positions in the drug trade.

## **Prison as a narrative landscape**

I spent 14 months collecting data through interviews and ethnographic immersion, participation and observation of prison life. Ethnographic observations allowed me to understand the situated meanings of victimisation, gender and trafficker identity in prison. This is an important base for understanding the context in which meaning is created and in particular how motive/justification are constructed in context:

‘Motives are of not of value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are the appropriate vocabularies. They must be situated. [...] The language of situations as given must be considered a valuable portion of the data to be interpreted and related to their conditions. To simplify these vocabularies of motive into a socially abstracted terminology is to destroy the legitimate use of motive in the explanation of social actions.’ (Wright Mills 1940: 913).

This section describes the ‘narrative landscape’ of the prison complex in Ecuador. In the same way that an environment shapes where a person can and cannot legitimately go, the narrative landscape of prison shapes what can and cannot be legitimately said. It is similar to Butlers’ ‘matrix of intelligibility’ (1990: 17) although it is not culture-wide, but prison wide (although the two are inter-related). The narrative landscape provides a set of meaningful codes for narrating oneself as prisoner/trafficker/man or woman. These compose the narrative landscape in which this research takes place: it shapes the questions which can be asked and the answers which can be given.

The ‘narrative landscape’ of prison is an example of ‘structured action’: it is both created by and sustained by inmates at the level of interaction. It is composed of an endless number of discourses, old and new, which intertwine and intersect to compose each narrative of self. There are thus possibilities for endless creativity and invention. My description of the narrative landscape is limited in scope. Here, I focus mainly on women drug traffickers. Furthermore, there were areas of prison life in which I could not participate (for example the drug rehabilitation clinic, psychologists’ offices and I could only visit during the daytime). This analysis is specific to the historical period during which I conducted fieldwork<sup>15</sup>. This section focuses on the intertwining discourses of imprisonment, trafficking and gender. It examines the various imperatives to narrate oneself in prison and the specific normative forms which narratives congregate around. After unpacking these discursive formats the next

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<sup>15</sup> Since fieldwork finished, many drug traffickers have been deported. The Correa administration has begun a series of prison reforms including deporting all mules who had less than 2 kilos of drugs. It is reasonable to assume that this policy change will have had profound effects on prison population and culture once again.

chapter will consider what this means both for data collection and for interpretation of data. The description and analysis builds on Torres' analysis of public narrative in the same women's prison (2006a).

### *Language*

The two main languages of the prison were Spanish and English. Although everyone spoke a basic level of Spanish, English was also commonly spoken among the international community. Many other languages were spoken in small groups (Quechua (an indigenous language of South America), Italian, Arabic, Russian, Afrikaans and Thai). My interpretation of prison discourse is based on public group narratives (all in English and Spanish) and a partial understanding of private discourses in prison.

### **Talk and time in men's and women's prisons in Ecuador**

Men's and women's prisons hosted a great culture of talk both privately and publicly. 'Time is the currency of prison life' (Crewe 2006: 347) much of which was spent sharing testimonials, anecdotes, jokes, storytelling and gossip. Anecdotes were swapped and traded, revealed and concealed in a perpetual, globalised 'marketplace' of talk.

This culture of talk is significant in three ways. The first was internal: and had to do with coming to terms with imprisonment. Secondly, it was external: to explain to the listener why the narrator is in (the extraordinary position of) prison. This was often a form of 'repair work' (Goffman 1968). This 'narrative of imprisonment' had concrete consequences for women and men in prison. Lastly, there was widespread agreement that in prison you could not be your 'real self' while isolated from family, job and other important aspects of identity. Talking about this past life was an important way to create/reveal one's 'true' self to the listener. Men and women had access to different narrative resources. Since this thesis focuses on women, I will describe the narrative context of the women's prison.

### **Narrative landscape in the women's prison: femininity, deviance and repair work**

Inmates came from diverse backgrounds around the world. They imported biographical narratives, cultures and criminal orientations to the prison and framed their recent experiences in the drug trade with established aspects of prison discourse to make them intelligible (similarly see Crewe 2006: 535). In spite of the diversity imported into prison, there was a surprising degree of convergence in the way that narratives were formed,

both in structure and the standard discourses which were employed. Underpinning women's narratives is a version of femininity which is respectable, sometimes traditional and which seeks to deflect deviant labelling. The preoccupation with respectability in the women's prison is noteworthy: 'respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it.' (Skeggs 1997: 1).

In prison one's narrative of self becomes an important tool for prison survival: privately as a way of making sense of the shock of imprisonment; as a form of social capital; as a way to assert oneself as an agent and lastly a resource for resisting the prison regime, not only individually but as a group.

### ***Narrative format***

Narratives of self in the women's prison adhered to a specific format. To highlight the teller's 'rehabilitation', narratives of imprisonment were overwhelmingly linear, chronological and culminated in a resolution. The beginning usually focussed on the move away from the 'normal': meeting the person who got them involved, financial crisis and so on. The 'middle' usually covered the period of time during the crisis and their involvement in trafficking. Usually the resolution was getting arrested and a following realisation of their experience which places it outside of their normal existence. Often it included an acceptance of guilt and possible acceptance of consequences. These forms of resolution closely mirrored the judgement in court and/or a religious confession.

This format of 'crisis and resolution' demonstrates that the author had changed due to the experience, (either their involvement in trafficking or their imprisonment). Noting (and narrating) the changes undergone during imprisonment may be a way to re-establish agency following a perceived loss of control (Bosworth 1999). Furthermore, this format also delineates the 'offence' from the normal self. This 'repair work' was necessitated by an ideological clash between drug trafficking crime (as stereotypically masculine, threatening and agential) and traditional 'respectable' femininity. By tracing the journey to deviance and back again the teller could deflect accusations of deviance or criminal status.

### **Sites for narration: imperatives and opportunities**

#### ***Imperatives: prison psychologists and social workers***

Prison psychologists and social workers presided over situations in which inmates had to 'explain themselves'. Doing so successfully (or unsuccessfully) had implications for how and where women would stay in the prison. This was not a trivial power since



placement in the prison was also related to whether you were seen as a good woman or a troubled/troublesome woman.

There were three blocks in the prison: the newest block which was the least crowded and had the best physical structure, the middle block with middling living conditions and the old block which was the oldest, chronically overcrowded and most dilapidated building. This labelling in turn affected the services and privileges which could be accessed and how a woman would be treated thereafter.

### *Other opportunities for narrating oneself*

There were a variety of other opportunities to volunteer to narrate oneself: religious groups, prison visitors (including feminist groups), Narcotics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation, informal chats with other prisoners and visitors created a variety of forums where women could narrate their experience meaningfully. These different audiences played an important role in legitimating and validating the teller's experience. Since 'storytelling is a vital human strategy for sustaining agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (Jackson 2002), these opportunities were highly valued by inmates.

There were several religious groups which worked in the prison. Being a widely Catholic country, religion was a prominent component of social life inside and outside prison. There was a chapel in the women's prison and religious services several times a week. Each pavilion held weekly meetings which included a group prayer.

A group of Christian missionaries worked closely with foreign (mostly, but not exclusively, non Latin/Hispanic) inmates. They held Bible study groups and counselled inmates on a variety of issues. They were also the gatekeepers to a variety of material services: distribution of donations, medical supplies and sponsorship for parole. They also ran a gift-card making business in the prison. Employees were chosen from the group of (mainly English speaking) foreigners who attended Bible study. Employment in this business depended on being drug-free. Given the scarcity of regular employment in the women's prison, a weekly wage represented a significant improvement in inmates' lives.

### **Landscape of discourses**

The narrative landscape of prison was composed of a number of different 'standard' discourses which could be adopted, borrowed from and changed to compose a narrative of self, as a woman, drug trafficker and prisoner as the situation demanded. These were not mutually exclusive but were layered and combined in narratives. I use the term 'discourse'

here to refer to describe the ‘public stories’ (Jamieson 1998: 13) which circulated in prison. Individuals appropriated these creatively to form individual narratives.

Running through all of the available discourses is the reconstruction of acceptable femininity as respectable and rational. Women felt intensely scrutinised in prison: such narrations of self implicitly guarded against the criticisms they feared the most: of being a bad mother, being stupid, irrational or greedy. Furthermore, these different discourses offer women a variety of positionalities: as subjects and agents, as guilty and innocent. Lastly, both discourses and narratives reflected a variety of strong emotional states ‘repentance, blame, anger, disappointment, deception’ were all sentiments which were interwoven with mules’ (Torres 2006b: 118).

### *Spirituality/religion*

Spiritual and religious testimonies appealed to the influence of supreme guidance. According to Torres ‘religious groups influenced the image that inmates wished to project of themselves. It was common to hear the phrase ‘I am not guilty but I must have done something for God to have me here’ (2005: 124 my translation). The position of agency in this type of narrative is complex: God plays an all powerful role. He can put the speaker into prison or take them out. It is also up to the individual to work hard on their faith and belief in God while they are in prison. In doing so, they measure their success or failure not by the validation they receive by the prison authorities (although that may also follow), but by their faith in God. This shifting of the goalposts from an appeal to legal innocence to an appeal for divine forgiveness is carried out in the context of a legal and criminal justice system that is overwhelmingly corrupt and un-listening.

This religious or spiritual femininity also appealed to the idea of a rebirth, self-realisation and redemption that allowed the narrator to understand the past as another part of oneself. Furthermore, acknowledging guilt allowed the narrator to create themselves in the present as God fearing and rehabilitated. Bosworth remarks that noting one’s own rehabilitation is a way in which inmates can claim agency (1999: 125).

### *Families and motherhood*

Many women constructed their experience in relation to their families. ‘Motherhood remains a crucial element of the social construction of femininity.... Many women in prison felt that their identity as mothers constituted the fundamental aspects of who they were.’ (Bosworth 1999: 148).

Emphasising the acceptance and forgiveness of one's family was a way to bypass judgement either in court or by prison officials or even other prisoners. This discursive form emphasised the moral connectedness of the woman in relation to her family (in contrast to the classicist notion of the individual as decision maker) as well as responsibility for others. This type of narrative also appeals to normative concept of maternal sacrifice for the good of her family. By situating their participation within this normative schema, the speaker could counter imagined accusations of abandoning one's family.

### *Romantic love*

Discourses of romantic love appeal both to what is apparently universal (the 'love' narrative being apparently international) and by what was individual (the special qualities of their relationship). Torres notes that 'love' should not be interpreted as a non-rational system since it has its own rewards and may be an equally valid system of thought, reason and logic (2005).

### **Collective identity in the women's prison: strategic victimisation**

The women's prison hosted several formal public events throughout the year including the annual 'Queen of the Prison'<sup>16</sup> pageant, weekly pavilion and Bible study group meetings and an the official launch of a feminist magazine co-written by women in prison (Mujeres de Frente 2006). At these events the public, collective voice of women in prison could be heard loudly and clearly.

Due to a number of injustices described in the first half of this chapter (unconstitutional imprisonment, living conditions which were violated inmates' human rights) the collective identity of the women prisoners was a key resource for protest, resistance and action. Interestingly, victim identity was a resource for action rather than passivity. Discourses of women's victimhood ricocheted round the prison and were agreed upon by everyone. The character of the mules was adopted as representative of the women in the Quito prison. Torres interviewed one of the prison officials:

'You will see for a fact that the majority of the population in this centre is here for drug trafficking. The majority of them are mules, people that have been used to carry the drugs and perhaps they did this because at that time they were forced to do that work out of economic necessity. It is simply a person with a need who they offer the world.' (Torres 2006b: 61).

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<sup>16</sup> In Spanish: 'Reina de la Carcél'.

Mules were international, multi-lingual and had a basic level of education. They were relatively privileged in the moral hierarchy of prison to have committed a crime that was non-violent and had no immediate victim. Thus, strategically adopting the 'mule' as a collective identity was ideologically advantageous as it was a relatively 'feminine' crime to commit. Although one of Torres' respondents thought that 80% of the prison were imprisoned as mules, a survey conducted by a local university and the prison directorate found that only 27.5% of the women in the prison self identified as 'mule' (Torres 2006a: 10-11, original source survey of inmates by FLACSO-DNRS 2005).

Although the collective identity often excluded women (in particular those who were black, violent or lesbian), in times of crisis the category of 'woman' was often used to appeal to a right to decent treatment from the prison authority<sup>17</sup>:

[The girls from the back pavilion] had this woman [guard] tied [to a gas tank]... because one girl wanted to go out with her baby to the hospital and they wouldn't let her out, so they tied this guard up n said if you don't let this woman out, we're gonna burn the guard, we're gonna light the gas bottle and all the guards all backed away. So it's actually the prisoners, the women here that are moving everything. They're in charge. (Sarah p.43).

Sarah makes it clear that the young mother *deserved* to be taken to the hospital not because she was a good or a bad person, but because she was a mother. At this time, the category of mother (as uniquely feminine) was the basis for common identity and appeal to action. Interestingly, in this instance the women who took the action were the stigmatised black population. By appealing to the universalizing category of woman, they could justify their extreme, violent behaviour which is outwith the bounds of traditional 'feminine' femininity.

### **Narrative landscape of the women's prison: summary**

This section has described the many overlapping and interwoven narratives which compose the narrative landscape of the women's prison. Inmates' narratives were changeable, mutable things: all tellings being true in different ways. This chapter has had to focus on what is general; the following chapters will pay more attention to individual contradiction and variation.

This narrative landscape creates a number of problems and possibilities for data collection which will be examined in the next chapter. Although there were a number of diverse discursive forms in prison there were variously underpinned by an appeal to

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, see Bosworth (1999: 143).

normative gender whether through the feminisation of poverty or the character of mule as subjugated and victimised. Understanding the narrative of the prison is crucial to understanding the narratives which form the basis of this thesis.

The narrative landscape promoted some identities and ruled out others. These were bound up with gender. Accordingly to Butler: 'the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot exist... because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to these norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain' (1990:17). Thus, there were a variety of narratives which appear to be impossible in prison. The most obvious is that of the successful female trafficker: potentially violent, working for herself and not her family, for greed rather than need. The next chapter will discuss the epistemological and ontological implications of collecting data analysing narratives of motive constructed in prison.

### **Narrative landscape of the men's prison: masculinities, imprisoned traffickers**

Although there was a great culture of talk and storytelling in the men's prisons, the narrative landscape was radically different in shape, meaning and purpose. This section describes the narrative landscape of the men's prison complex in Quito. There were two men's prisons which were broadly similar<sup>18</sup>.

#### *Opportunities and imperatives for narration*

Male prisoners had few opportunities to narrate themselves. Outside prison, court hearings were one such setting. Here, a linear, chronological and explanatory narrative was required in the form of the statement given. Nonetheless, this narrative was constructed somewhat pragmatically: it was understood as an opportunity to construct experiences in the best possible light in order to get the lowest sentence more than an opportunity to tell the truth and be morally vindicated by the judge. Although this sphere was important (since their future was decided there) it was not a sphere for validation of the self or legitimating experiences.

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<sup>18</sup> These two prisons were part of the same, large prison complex which housed all the male prisoners in Quito. These two prisons were each divided into several pavilions which contained the majority of prisoners. In addition there were a variety of specialised pavilions. There was a maximum security pavilion which was run by the police; another pavilions for debtors who could not stay in the main prison because they would be subject to retributive attacks for their debts; another was for prisoners who had committed serious crimes in prison and had to be isolated from the main prison (those who had committed murder and extortion while they were in prison) and finally there was a drug rehabilitation pavilion at the rear of the prison.

Inside the men's prison there were very few occasions when prisoners would be asked to tell their story. Unlike the women's prison, there was only minimal intervention and control over prisoners by prison officials (psychologists, social workers or even guards). The men's prison was organised largely by inmates and in particular the inmates' committee who were democratically elected inmates. Whereas in the women's prison, women were placed in a particular prison and were supervised by psychologists and social workers, here accommodation was organised by the committee.

Unlike in the women's prison, men could own their cells<sup>19</sup> although the pavilion committee<sup>20</sup> owned only a very small number of cells which were reserved for those prisoners who were considered particularly sick or needy. Even though a man might own his cell, due to overcrowding he would have to share it with at least 2 other men who would sleep there during the night (and depending on their status might have to leave the cell during the day). The body of the men's prison consisted of three 'mainstream' pavilions which were variously 'classed' in ways similar to the women's prison. The oldest, least well-decorated pavilion was the home of the least well-off inmates; the best-decorated pavilion was the home of drug traffickers and foreigners.

The committee used their position of power over accommodation to control inmates' behaviour: anyone failing to comport themselves in an acceptable manner (the measure of 'acceptable' being largely defined by inmates) could be moved to another pavilion, or even to another prison. Although the committee exercised power through managing accommodation, guards and the director dealt with serious offences in prison although the committee would also be involved with mediation and finding out what happened. In such cases, an inmate could be sent to the 'calabozo'<sup>21</sup>.

The outcome of this system was that inmates were not reliant on narrating themselves as reformed to gain access to better living conditions. Furthermore, the fact that prison was connected to a variety of drug trafficking networks (from all over the world) meant that prison culture imported a variety of criminal 'codes' of behaviour.

### *Narrative format and styles*

In the men's prison the linear, explanatory form of narrative had little privilege, status or opportunities for performance. Due to the close links with trafficking networks (as I described earlier in this chapter) talking explicitly about one's role in trafficking was

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<sup>19</sup> See also Young (2003) for a description of similar customs in prisons in Bolivia.

<sup>20</sup> Each pavilion had a small committee elected by the residents who organised cleaning, maintenance, collection of dues and other tasks necessary to maintain the day to day running of the pavilion.

<sup>21</sup> 'Calabozo' literally translates as 'Dungeon'. This was a prison within a prison where inmates were locked up for 24 hours a day in extremely overcrowded conditions as punishment.

uncommon. Since having a loose tongue (*boca floja*) was seen as dangerous in trafficking, demonstrating one's ability to keep quiet was seen as proof of strong character and professionalism. Anyone who bragged too loudly was seen as untrustworthy. Nonetheless, reputation was a valuable capital that had to be made and maintained. In part this was done through one's actions in prison, but this was also through storytelling and in particular through anecdotes and jokes. Sometimes these were a way to pass the time but were also a way to make clear that the teller was capable of taking care of business on the outside (and by implication on the inside too). Reputation was created (and managed) through a careful process of partial revelation and the filtration of this into 'common knowledge'. What was *not* revealed was as important as what *was*.

When prisoners first arrived, it was usual for them to explain how they got there to other prisoners. These narratives were similarly about 'coming to terms' with imprisonment (as in the women's prison) however they were usually concerned with explaining the teller's arrest, rather than their involvement with trafficking. They centred on fate, bad luck, being double crossed or betrayed or a simple pragmatism that if you play the game for long enough you will have to spend some time in prison eventually. It was a common saying in prison that anyone who got involved in drug trafficking knew they would either get rich, go to prison, or get killed. Interestingly, such narratives could also place men as subjects (rather than agents) within larger structures.

As in the women's prison, this explanation is a form of repair work, here underpinned by accomplishment of hegemonic masculinity. Failure to be successful in one's business as a trafficker were potentially damaging to one's status as a successful man.

Narrating oneself as a mule had very little practical use in men's prisons. Whilst women tended to downplay their involvement in trafficking (even women who had done many trips described themselves as mules) in the men's prison it was the opposite. Although it is impossible to know exactly, men were more likely to hint at the depth of their involvement rather than protest their innocence. Indeed protesting one's innocence was likely to be met with disbelief (and distrust).

The men's prison was a tough place to live: violence was rife, extortion was common, fights were a daily occurrence, deaths occurred on an almost weekly basis. Many prisoners carried weapons and an assassin could be bought for as little as a matchbox of *basuco* (for a description of *basuco* see Inciardi 1987: 466; Nuñez 2006a). Peace was rare and life was fragile. Unsurprisingly, there was a lot of 'front' in what was said or hinted at. In private conversation respondents revealed sides of themselves which sometimes ran contrary to public reputation. They talked about romance, love, fatherhood, friendship,

families and their hopes for the future in much more tender forms that the above description would suggest could exist in the harsh prison environment. Nonetheless, the space between public and private personas could be vast.

Unlike in the women's prison there were no public occasions in which a common identity would be useful. The committee of inmates were elected as representatives by other inmates and spoke for them publicly. Whilst their public representation did not necessarily seek to negate criminality (as was the case in the women's prison), it did seek to portray them as human and deserving of humane and fair treatment while their liberty was deprived (Herrera 2005; Nuñez 2006a).

### **Chapter conclusion: prisons in Ecuador**

This chapter contextualised the research by describing the place of the prison in international geopolitics of 'justice' (drug enforcement policies and practices) and in global networks of drug trafficking. Within these networks, prison is a 'hub' where a high concentration of drug traffickers from over the world was present and visible. Next I described the narrative landscape of prison. This landscape is a product of criminal justice narratives of imprisonment and reform and also the networks of drug trafficking which import different histories, ideals and discourses into prison about what it means to be gendered/imprisoned/a drug trafficker.

Understanding the relationship between the context of prison and the data collected is important since the prison context shapes how respondents describe their experiences in drug trafficking. Most interestingly, in the women's prison a tactic of strategic victim-hood was adopted as a group and also individually. Strategic adoption of victimhood could also be a tool for action: for example to protest against the victimising context of prisons in Ecuador which were subject to severe overcrowding. Since the narrative landscapes of prison encouraged some kinds of talk and discouraged others, the context of research had important implications for data collection and analysis: this is the subject of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 5: METHODS OF RESEARCH: ETHNOGRAPHY, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

### Introduction: methods of research

Building on the description of prison in the last chapter, this chapter describes the methods of research employed, the kinds of data which were collected and explains how data was analysed.

Recounting the methods of research employed allows the reader to ‘adequately judge the validity of observations’ (Taylor 1993: 9/10), something that researchers on organised crime and drug trafficking have been less than forthcoming about. Although Hobbs claimed he was ‘flaunting academic orthodoxy by postponing a detailed methodological discussion of the problems of researching covert deviant populations’ (1995: 2) in fact, very few accounts of researching serious/organised crime pay much attention to methodology (see for example Desroches 2005, Dorn et al. 1992, Wright 2006). As a result of this reticence: ‘those who have found themselves researching the field are plagued by insufficient evidence on which to base hypothesis or methodology’ (Browne, et al. 2003: 324).

Whilst some social scientists have developed sophisticated modelling tools to learn about the drug trade, this research approaches it instead as a social phenomenon. This research begins with the premise that those who traffic drugs are ‘ordinary people, not a special breed, not bandits. They are to blame for something but they are not wild animals.’ (Christie 1994: 36). There is a wealth of available advice on how to do research with people who are imprisoned/‘criminal’. Although working in a closed institution shaped this research in some significant ways, the ethnographic methods employed had much in common with ‘street ethnography’ (for example Maher 1997). In describing the methodologies employed, I hope to show that this research project was more ordinary than extraordinary. Indeed: ‘most difficulties that one meets and solves in doing field research on criminals are simply the difficulties one meets and solves doing field research.’ (Polsky 1985: 119).

This research is concerned with understanding women’s experiences working in the drug trade as drugs mules. As I outlined in chapter 1, most research on drug trafficking has been underpinned by gender blind assumptions. This gender-blindness is embedded in the methods of research employed (for example generalising from all male samples). Here, methods of research chosen avoid sexist assumptions, forefront the experiences and knowledge of women in the drug trade and analyse data appropriately to avoid framing women’s experiences in androcentric terms (Burman, et al. 2001: 446).

This chapter focuses on methods of research employed in the women's prison. There is a section at the end of this chapter describing methods employed researching in the men's prison.

### **'Getting into trafficking'**

Rather than a traditional account of 'getting in' which inevitably presents the researcher as a hero penetrating the underworld of crime inhabited by hard men, experts in deceit and roguish cunning, this section will confront common assumptions about researching drug trafficking.

The lack of research on drug trafficking has largely been attributed to the fact that traffickers are a hidden and secretive community and that organised crime is violent and dangerous. The further paucity of research in this area has done little to combat these widely believed ideas: accordingly no further research gets done and this lack is taken as evidence of the stated claims. It is now widely assumed that traffickers are hard to find, they are highly secretive (in other words they 'lie') and that as participants in a violent ruthless world, they pose a risk to the researcher.

Furthermore, in academia there is a 'widely-held, though often un-stated belief that what a field researcher studies, to some degree, reflects his or her personal values, interests or preoccupations. Translation: if you're studying deviants, you must want to be one of them, or at the very least you sympathise with their activities and even approve of them.' (Jacobs 2006: 166). Such assumptions have frequently led to the field of drugs research being considered 'strange, worthless or petty' (Adler 1985: ix).

At this point, it seems necessary to set the record straight about how I got involved in trafficking. Although the 'why' is unanswerable, the 'how' is straightforward. While I was on holiday in Ecuador in 2002 I read about visiting foreign nationals in prison. I had heard that there was a Scottish inmate in the men's prison so decided to go there. I arrived at the prison gates on visiting day with a bag of toilet paper, chocolates, cigarettes and an American exchange student I had taken along for company. All that visitors needed to enter the prison was formal identification (such as a passport) and the name of the prisoner they were going to visit<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> I do not know how the practice of visiting foreign inmates in prisons in Ecuador began. Some inmates thought that this custom had spread from the San Pedro Prison in La Paz, Bolivia. Rusty Young reports that he read about visiting inmates in the Lonely Planet Guide book. He then wrote 'Marching Powder' which further publicised visiting prisons as a tourist attraction. These prison 'tours' continue touted as 'the most bizarre tourist attraction' (Baker, V. 2009, January 17th 'Prison Break' *The Guardian*, Manchester.) Young reports that inmates charged visitors for the tour which

This encounter sparked my academic interest in the drug trade: inmates were open about their experiences and encouraged me to visit the women's prison. After I returned to the UK, I wrote to inmates in the men's and women's prisons who called and wrote back encouraging me to return to do research. At this time no formal ethical procedures were in place and I was able to do a quick and short piece of investigative research into women in the drug trade in 2003 (Fleetwood 2004). At the time, it seemed like 'this was a piece of research just waiting to be done,' (Winlow 2001: 12).

Research for my undergraduate dissertation took place during visiting days (Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays). Formal access to the prison for my PhD research was organised with the Ecuadorian Prison Directorate (DNRS<sup>23</sup>) through a local university (FLACSO<sup>24</sup>). Anthropologists Jorge Nuñez and Paco García requested permission for an official pass to work in prison on week days as part of the project 'Prison in Ecuador: daily life, power relations and public policies'<sup>25</sup> being conducted by the Urban studies program<sup>26</sup> where I was based as an Associated Researcher. I remain extremely grateful to the department for all their practical assistance, support and encouragement.

### **Wasn't it dangerous?**

I am often asked: 'how did you get them to speak to you? Wasn't it dangerous?' (Jacobs 2006: 157): a question all the more salient because of my lack of field research experience coupled with the fact I am female<sup>27</sup>, white, Scottish and in my early twenties. Nonetheless, such concerns are largely fuelled by stereotypes of traffickers (and prisoners) which I hope have been successfully unpacked in chapters 1 and 4. Fundamentally, 'researchers should not select themselves out of research on the basis of stereotypes' (Sluka 1995: 290). The subject of risk to the researcher is rarely discussed in the literature on

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included the chance to take cocaine and/or stay overnight for 'the best party in Bolivia'; Baker reports this fee is now £25 (ibid).

Prison visiting never took this form in Quito. I did not pay for a 'tour', nor did I go in looking for a party or an opportunity to buy or take drugs. I heard about visiting through a local organisation called the South American Explorers Club. At that time they collected much needed donations for male and female prisoners and delivered them sporadically to the prison. This was and is completely separate from the setup in Bolivia.

<sup>23</sup> Dirección Nacional de Rehabilitación Social.

<sup>24</sup> Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, sede Quito, Ecuador ([www.flacso.org.ec](http://www.flacso.org.ec)).

<sup>25</sup> 'La Cárcel en Ecuador: vida cotidiana, relaciones de poder y políticas públicas'

<sup>26</sup> Programa de Estudios del Ciudad.

<sup>27</sup> Although some have claimed that being female makes the researcher more (Craig, G., Corden, A. and Thornton, P. 2000 'Safety Issues in Social Research' *Social Research Update*.) or less (Taylor 1993) vulnerable, I can only conclude that gender is not the only factor involved in researcher safety and may not always be the most salient. Other salient identities in this fieldwork included my nationality, language, status as visitor and friend as well as researcher.

methodology (Lee 1995; Sluka 1995). Nonetheless ethnographic immersion is the only way to understand local concerns and practices for avoiding danger in the field (Williams, et al. 1992: 344).

Although violent incidents in prison were common<sup>28</sup> and this was troubling, personal threat during fieldwork was far less than might be expected. Initially, respondents accompanied me about the prison introducing me to everyone. Quickly I became ‘part of the furniture’ (Wilson 2006: 5) and could wander about public places unaccompanied without feeling at risk. In the men’s prison, one respondent noted after only a few months: ‘they all know not to go near you by now’, rather ominously referring to the *polillas* a subclass of poor inmates who hang about the corridors hassling other inmates for spare change and cigarettes (Nuñez 2006a). Although it might seem that inmates would pose a greater risk than guards, guards occasionally tried to relieve me of phone cards, pens, chocolate and cigarettes in less than legitimate ways when they searched me on my way into prison.

Visitors were welcomed in all prisons and had a privileged status. Although working in the men’s prison might seem particularly risky, in fact I was not the only female ethnographer. Margarita Camacho, an artist and social scientist did an ethnographic study of transvestites in prison at the same time (Camacho 2007). As women and as interested friends, writers and witnesses to the brutal conditions of imprisonment we were perhaps treated with a reverence that male researchers were not<sup>29</sup>.

Respondents welcomed me with unexpected generosity of time and spirit. They ‘watched my back’, cooked for me, and gave me endless cups of tea, cigarettes, advice, prayer, hugs, drawings and endless amounts of encouragement. They were quick to tell me when I got things wrong as well as when I got things right. Their support during fieldwork made working in a difficult place significantly easier.

Taylor identifies a triad of dangers faced by the fieldworker: legal, health and personal (1993: 17). The legal status of myself and data collected were a particular methodological problem. Appendix 2 deals with this in detail. Other ‘dangers’ encountered in fieldwork were largely endemic to most postgraduate ethnographic field research: stress, isolation, nightmares, smoking too much, anxiety about the quality of the research and pressure to collect sufficient data. Overcrowding, lack of proper sanitation and healthcare, heating or ventilation meant that ill health was the norm for many inmates: coughs and colds

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<sup>28</sup> As detailed in chapter three, violence was institutionalised practice and violence was an everyday occurrence. Several violent incidents occurred in the men’s prison during fieldwork including several murders. A woman guard was assassinated leaving the men’s prison. Nonetheless, as a visitor I rarely witnessed any violence, in part due to respondents warning me when not to come into prison and warning me away from certain areas of the prison.

<sup>29</sup> I heard that one male ethnographer was punched by a guard who mistook him for another prisoner.

were unavoidable. Although the dramatic potential of violence and hostage taking<sup>30</sup> influenced how I researched to an extent, everyday risks had a more profound effect on the daily realities of research in prison.

These risks were discussed in two meetings with the Ethical Review Board at the University and were monitored and discussed with supervisors throughout fieldwork.

### **How did you get drug traffickers to speak to you?**

In the majority of research on trafficking/traffickers based in prison, interviews are negotiated through intermediaries such as prison guards, directors, psychologists and so on (Decker and Chapman 2008; Desroches 2005; Dorn, et al. 1992; Reuter and Haaga 1989). In contrast I had ‘full and unaccompanied access’ (Crewe 2006: 349) once inside the prison which enabled me to negotiate interviews with respondents directly in a way sensitive to their concerns and codes of behaviour in prison.

Respondents participated in research enthusiastically. Although I cannot answer with much authority exactly *why*, I suspect that the length of my involvement in prison allowed me to develop trust with respondents. Furthermore, as a researcher I occupied a privileged position: ‘where others fear or ignore them or want to lock them up, you’re trying to tell their story’ (Jacobs, 2006: 160). One respondent commented: ‘you’ve got to be visited; you’ve got to be seen and heard’. The isolation of prison could be at times overwhelming for respondents. More than one commented that imprisonment was like being buried alive. Wacquant similarly describes prisons in the USA as ‘humungous human storehouses’: ‘a safe for men buried alive far away from societies eyes, ears and minds.’ (2002: 373). In this context being listened to has powerful meanings.

Imprisonment is stressful and boring. As an outsider I was a distraction from the everyday routines. Inmates, particularly those from outside Latin America seemed to enjoy the chance to keep in touch with the outside world and the chance to enjoy a temporary sense of normality (Denton 2001: 9).

Some respondents took active roles in helping negotiate access to the prison. They organised meetings with prison directors to enable me to take in a tape recorder, helped compile a report for the ethics committee describing prison and my place there as a

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<sup>30</sup> Protests in prison (about conditions, constitutional and human rights abuses) were frequent and occasionally involved holding visits ‘hostage’ in prison. These sometimes lasted 2 days although have lasted up to 10 days. Where visits were being held, they were peaceful affairs. Other researchers have chosen to time their visits to participate in these protests (see Herrera 2005 and Nuñez 2006) they were relatively easy to avoid.

researcher (despite their daily realities being distinctly ‘unsafe’) and they enthusiastically hosted a visit from my supervisor Dr Angus Bancroft<sup>31</sup>.

## **Data collection**

### **Choice of research methods**

The particular alchemy of place, people and topic had already been set into motion long before PhD fieldwork began. As a result ‘the choice of research method was never really open to debate.’ (Winlow 2001: 10).

I chose research methods which built on existing relationships and interaction. I collected data using a mix of ethnographic observation and interviews. Ethnographic interviewing differs from conventional interviewing in several ways: rather than a one-off exchange, the researcher engages in on-going meaningful relationships with respondents. This enables the respondent ‘to explore purposefully, with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds.’ (Heyl 2001: 369). Where possible, this research was ‘respondent directive’ (Smith and Wincup 2000: 342).

As far as possible, fieldwork was characterised by long term, ‘heartfelt engagement, physically and affectively’ (Liebling 2001) with people, place and topic. Unfortunately ‘there are no shortcuts to or through women’s [or men’s] lives. Ethnography is a messy business and nowhere more so than when it seeks to traverse race, class and cultural boundaries.’ (Maher 1997: 233), ethnography is nonetheless the method best suited to appreciating and working in the multiple spaces ‘between’: us/them, inside/outside, here/there, before and now.

### **Fieldwork: day to day**

Research was conducted in three prisons in Quito, Ecuador<sup>32</sup>). During fieldwork I visited prisons an average of four times a week (three days in the women’s prison; one day visiting men’s prisons). I usually arrived at 10am and stayed in prison until 4pm (according to the conditions of my work pass).

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<sup>31</sup> My parents, sister and friends also visited the women’s prison. My flatmates also visited the women’s and men’s prison with me. While it might be unusual practice to bring one’s family into the field (Piacentini, L. 2004 *Surviving Russian prisons : punishment, economy and politics in transition*, Cullompton ; Portland, Or.: Willan.) this was a way to bridge the gap between outside and inside. I am particularly grateful to Octavio Ycaza for visiting prison with me.

<sup>32</sup> Officially they are known as Centro de Rehabilitación Social Femenino, Quito (CRSVQ), Centro de Rehabilitación de Varones, Quito numero 1 and numero 3 (CRSVQ1 and CRSVQ3).

When I arrived I was searched by the guards before I entered the prison unaccompanied. Most days I hung out with inmates while they went about their daily business, working, cooking and hanging around in the patio or in their rooms. In the women's prison I was free to go wherever I wished. I tried to hang out with as diverse a variety of inmates as possible. The prison population was around 600; most 'foreign' inmates (those not from Ecuador or Latin America) knew each other and often hung out together. I also attended a variety of meetings and public events in the prison such as weekly pavilion meetings, work meetings, Bible study group, the annual Queen of the prison contest, birthday parties and other social events. This gave me a chance to observe public and group representations.

Respondents were recruited on a pragmatic basis. I talked to as many women as possible and told them who I was and that I was in prison researching drug trafficking. Some inmates (many of those who were convicted of drug trafficking) encouraged me to hang out with them so we could have more chance to speak. After taking some time to get to know them (and vice versa), I asked them if they would be interested in 'telling me their story'. Most agreed. Typically we would arrange to meet during my next visit (or whenever suited them best) to talk about their experiences. This allowed a short 'cooling off' period so that respondents would have a chance to change their mind about taking part without having to say no directly. This happened in a couple of instances.

The order that respondents were recruited and interviewed in was also pragmatic. Negotiating the interpersonal politics of the prison was tricky: affiliations among inmates were made and broken on a regular basis. Introductions were also made between prisons. Sometimes men would ask me to take a note to a woman they had met in CDP<sup>33</sup> (the first prison where inmates are held temporarily immediately after they were first arrested). This allowed me to widen my circle of introductions considerably. Although interpersonal introductions were an important way to gain trust and reputation, I tried to maintain as independent a position as I could to avoid being caught up in interpersonal politics.

Lastly, a word on language issues: I am fluent in Spanish and English. Fluency in Spanish was necessary to be able to participate in social life in prison. Nonetheless due to the importance of English in this globalised locale, I was able to conduct many interviews in English; I conducted some others in Spanish and some in a mixture of the two languages.

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<sup>33</sup> Centro de Detención Provisional.

## Researching drug trafficking in prison: problems and possibilities

It has long been assumed that ‘genuine’ qualitative research about crime and criminals cannot be done with an imprisoned population: as a group they are not representative and as individuals they lie (Polsky 1985 first published 1969). This is an important criticism which must be addressed.

An important justification for research drug trafficking from prison is that there is a lack of viable alternative. Given that drug trafficking does not take part in a static geographical location but rather a virtual network, trying to observe trafficking firsthand is not practical or safe. As such, previous ethnographies on drug trafficking have been conducted at a distance from the actual traffic (Adler 1993; Zaitch 2002). The next best then would seem to be interviewing active traffickers about their involvement. Patricia Adler’s *Wheeling and Dealing* is based on ethnographic ‘participant observation’ with a group of drug importers and wholesalers in Southern California in the late 1970’s (1993). In this instance, business organisation overlapped with subculture: there was a palpable, geographically embedded social phenomenon to be studied. Although Adler’s research says much about drug trafficking subculture, her account relies heavily on respondent’s descriptions and explanations about trafficking.

Despite there being a lack of viable alternative, prisons may actually be a good site from which to research drug trafficking. Given that trafficking appears to be happening everywhere and nowhere, doing research is not simply a case of ‘getting out of our offices onto the street’ (Chambliss 1979 cited by Hobbs 1995: 3). As a hub in global drug trafficking networks, prison is a tried and tested locale for locating traffickers. Indeed the majority of research on drug traffickers (and mules) has been conducted in prison (see Appendix 1 which provides an overview of qualitative research on drug trafficking). In the last chapter, I showed that prisons are part of the networks and flows of drug trafficking, rather than simply standing apart from it. Although most traffickers do not get caught, some do.

Prisons in Ecuador have a particularly high concentration of traffickers due to its geographic location:

Ecuador does not produce enough cocaine or other illicit drugs to make it a national or security threat. Nevertheless, Ecuador has two roles in international drug trafficking. First it is considered a transit route for drugs, a supplier of precursor chemical and weapons used in the drug trade and – though this has not been well documented – minor haven for money laundering. Second, the Ecuadorian government has been a participant in the international drug war since the 1980’s, when drug trafficking was first defined as a national security issue. (Rivera 2005: 233)



Despite the centrality of Ecuador in both exportation and anti-drug politics, Ecuador (aside from the northern border zone with Colombia) is a relatively safe place to live (and research). Furthermore, as site of export, the prison population is remarkably international.

### **‘Criminals lie’**

‘The accuracy of any picture based on descriptive research is open to question. It is even more so when the object of research is a group which, by definition, is concealed and invests in secrecy.’ (Dorn et al. 1992: xi).

Deception may be ‘part of the criminal game’ (Hobbs 1995:5) but this does not mean that people convicted of an offence will lie any more than anyone else, or that they do so irrationally or illogically. There are usually good reasons for providing only partial or entirely fabricated answers. As I described above, access was negotiated directly and only with respondents. No intermediaries were employed: no guards, no prison directors, no ‘enforcement agencies’ and no police informants. I was open and honest about the research process, expected outcomes, what would happen with the data, what my ‘job’ was and who I worked for. This made it clear that I was not connected with police, Interpol<sup>34</sup>, the CIA or the DEA<sup>35</sup> and that I was not interested in ‘helping to catch more traffickers’. When respondents were interested, I provided copies of what I had written<sup>36</sup>. This did much to limit suspicion that data would be used for purposes that were undesired and, I hope, increased confidence in my research and me. Lastly other prison researchers have noted the remarkable honesty that conversations in prison can elicit (Liebling 1999).

For some respondents, being ‘outed’ as a trafficker meant that they were more open to talking about business than they might have been on the outside. According to Zaitch’s account of ethnographic research:

‘I kept a very low profile in Colombia, avoiding for example direct, open interaction as a social researcher with cocaine exporters. However, either as a simple tourist or as a friend’s friend, in few occasions I was by chance confronted with drug exporters: in busses, restaurants discotheques and even at their own birthday parties.

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<sup>34</sup> ‘ICPO-Interpol’ stands for International Criminal Police Organisation and is an international police force with 187 member countries including Ecuador. <http://www.interpol.int/public/icpo/default.asp>  
Respondents often reported that they were arrested by police from Interpol.

<sup>35</sup> See Lee (1995) for more on the historical connection between ethnography and spying. See also **Horowitz, I. L.** 1967 *The rise and fall of Project Camelot: studies in the relationship between social science and practical politics*, Cambridge, Mass. ; London: M.I.T. Press.

<sup>36</sup> This included not only academic work but also a fact sheet for prisoners abroad (Fleetwood 2007), conference abstracts, presentations, a report to the ethics committee and a report on human rights.

While references to their illegal activities were either marginal or absent, I nevertheless learned a lot by observing.' (2002: 10).

Conversely, by working in prison, I was able to engage in 'direct, open interaction' fairly easily with a large number of traffickers. Of course respondents were keen to present themselves in a good light, but this is hardly exceptional: 'lies were commonplace, especially when discussing one's own [...] experiences and skills and were in fact taken as a facet of engaging with fragile egos in a world of looking glass selves.' (Winlow et al. 2001: 543). However, this does not necessarily preclude telling the 'truth'.

Although some studies have sought to establish the reliability of respondents' accounts either by checking their knowledge of the market through wholesale prices (Hobbs and Pearson 2001) or through triangulation with pre-sentence reports (Reuter and Haaga 1989: 6), this type of data may not be sufficiently reliable. The recorded weight of drugs was frequently reported by respondents to be inaccurate (either when drugs went 'missing' or when the weight included packaging and sometimes even the suitcase the drugs were concealed in). More importantly, this kind of 'factual' data is of little relevance where research seeks to understand the social and cultural meanings of people and groups studied (Zaitch 2002: 7).

Lastly, interviews were arranged to avoid putting the respondent under pressure to talk about something they did not want to which would have made them more likely to lie. Respondents sometimes avoided answering questions and ran off to do something urgent, or said that they would talk about that another time: likely a subtle way of steering me away from what they did not want to discuss.

### **Power, authority and representation in the women's prison**

'Politics has to do with the kind of conversations you have with people and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say.' (Atwood and Ingersoll 1990: 137).

In the women's prison the group identity was based on the category of the drugs mule as victim: exploited, naïve and therefore unknowing. This complicated women's willingness to talk about their involvement in trafficking and shaped how they chose to speak about it. Understanding and negotiating this was an important aspect of the production of data which went further than official representations of women in the drug trade.

The public representation of prisoners was subject to informal social control by inmates. Towards the end of fieldwork I was called to attend a meeting with the Prison Director and some members of the committee of inmates. Although I had been introduced to members of the committee, I did not know them well. Furthermore, they had not participated in my research. They explained to me that the women were tired of being treated as ‘lab rats’ and that (somewhat ambiguously) I ought to ‘contribute’ to the prison<sup>37</sup>. This incident was unexpected and troubling.

I had strived to maintain reciprocity with inmates as far as possible. Interviews were negotiated on an individual basis in ways that were designed to avoid exploitation. Respondents had enthusiastically taken part in interviews, introduced me to others and explained what the interview was like and what my research was about. As far as I could see, I had succeeded in negotiating research in a way that avoided exploitation and respected respondents privacy and autonomy in spite of the complexity of the prison setting where ‘the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave’ (Stacey 1991: 113).

Research continued after this confrontation. I immediately discussed these criticisms with respondents. They confirmed that they did not feel exploited by my presence or by the research and encouraged me to continue. Although the prison Director (and committee) could not take away my work pass (since it was issued from the National Prison Directorate) the Director could (and did) refuse permission to use a tape recorder in prison. He contended that my recorder was a security risk and I could only continue to use it if he could review the tapes. I refused. I relied on note-taking as I had in the men’s prison. Respondents adapted to this admirably. One woman took me up to her room to do an interview. She made me tea and slowly took me through her story, pausing to make sure I got everything written down. Afterwards she declared: ‘Now you are happy! I thought you were sad before when they didn’t let you work.’ This was reassuring and spurred me on to conduct more interviews.

In retrospect, this conflict was largely about power, internal politics and representation. Before this point, I had interviewed many of the women who fit the high profile category of ‘mule’ in the prison. I was also beginning to interview women who were experienced traffickers or were deviant in other ways (lesbians, drug users, women with violent reputations). Although we attempted to do this covertly, the power of gossip in the prison was fierce. In sum, I was interviewing the kind of women the committee did not want to represent publicly. The committee exercised their available power through the director to try and shape my research in ways which adhered to their strategy of representing

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<sup>37</sup> This may or may not have been an invitation to make a financial gift (i.e. a bribe) to the prison director or committee. I ignored this request.

themselves as mules and as victims. Whilst the committee were always cordial with me (and even friendly) this attempt at censorship said much about how group identity was carefully managed and enforced.

### **Countering perceptions of stigma**

This research had the potential to expose respondents to judgements and perceptions of stigmatisation as ‘criminal women’. Many women simply wanted to forget about the past and move on (see also Torres 2008: 21), others found talking about their involvement in drug trafficking painful and emotional. Interviews were regularly postponed when respondents were in pain, ill or down having received bad news: about home or their legal process<sup>38</sup>.

Where possible, interviews took place in respondents’ rooms where they could control who was present. Overcrowding in the prison meant that space and privacy were often a luxury. Furthermore, there was no space (such as offices) which could be used to conduct interviews privately. Interviewing inmates in their rooms was therefore the best option.

I usually began the interview by asking: ‘so, tell me how you got here?’ This usually elicited a narrative that the respondent had told before and was comfortable with. Sometime these were very short, some lasted for as long as an hour. Respondents started and finished where it was important to them and were free to highlight aspects of their experience which they saw as the most important. Torres notes that initially she found it difficult to find women who would talk to her about drug trafficking. At first women volunteered to ‘tell their story’ but didn’t want to be interviewed (questioned or interrogated) about their experience (2006a: 120). Her experience hints at both the importance of presenting a united front which adopts strategic victimisation and the fragile nature of women’s public narratives of being a drug trafficker. Some respondents were not comfortable with simply talking (usually those whose command of English or Spanish was not so confident). One respondent said it would be better if I just asked her lots of questions. In sum, interviews were ‘designed’ to encourage respondents to take control but tried to do so in a way that did not place any additional burden on them (Maher 1997: 231).

During interviews inmates often displayed feelings of guilt and embarrassment or sadness: narratives had to be probed extremely carefully. This had to be done in a safe

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<sup>38</sup> Although I never interviewed anyone waiting for trial, many inmates were engaged in the long legal struggle of appeal. Processes for transfer, deportation and parole were slow and stressful. Court dates were constantly moved or delayed, lawyers absconded with money, files got lost and the constant state of not knowing what was happening was extremely stressful.

context where respondents felt that they would not be judged. Whilst some respondents were open to being probed about their experiences this was not the case for everyone. Some respondents were more interested in using the interview as an opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their experiences in the drug trade.

My protracted presence in the prison enabled me to take a long time to get to know each respondent and in turn let them become familiar with me. Although it is difficult to know how I was perceived, inmates told me that they enjoyed hanging out with me and seemed relaxed. Given the climate of judgement and gossip that existed in prison (which was a form of both social cohesion and control) it was especially important for potential respondents to see that I was not merely interested in them as objects of study, but also as people. This meant being interested in their present as well as their past, being earnestly engaged, non judgemental and upholding all confidences. This was particularly important given that gossip was a powerful weapon in prison.

A final note about stigma: the reader will notice that few women refer directly to drugs in their interviews. Euphemisms include: ‘capsules’ ‘the stuff’, ‘merchandise’, ‘it’, ‘that shit’, etc. Torres attributes this to an internalisation of the taboo of talking about one’s involvement in drugs in the women’s prison (2008: 21). Furthermore, respondents struggled for a word to sum up the work of being a mule. Many use the euphemism of travelling (rather than trafficking).

### **Dangerous talk**

Prison was connected to networks of trafficking: being seen to have a loose tongue was potentially dangerous for respondents. For women still connected to drug trafficking networks there were often good reasons *not* to talk:

They like to boast amongst each other in the prison, but for people like you... there’s a code of privacy, because if you’re so high up they’ll kill you. But what am I? A drug mule – nobody cares about me but if you’re someone big, they’ll kill you... I don’t know too much about the Mafia because I’ve never been close to the Mafia and I don’t want to be. (Caroline p.11 2003).

I was advised:

I don’t think if it’s a person from the outside... they’re going to talk about it, like to you. But I’ve never heard of *them* [professionals] talking to any visitors. We’re more open to talk to people who we don’t know about what happened. But *they* did it

many times and it's kind of dangerous for them; they're mixing with these people still. (Paula p.2 2003).

Conversely, for Paula and Caroline being seen to be able to talk about trafficking had a set of specific meanings. Whereas for some 'talking' was potentially threatening, for the speakers it was a way of publicly demonstrating one's innocence by showing you had nothing to hide.

It was much more difficult to get 'involved' women to take part in research. Although I tried to purposefully recruit women who were more experienced, it only emerged during interviews that respondents had made more than one trip or had worked in different role, for example recruiting mules.

Whilst active male traffickers were much less concerned about the repercussions of taking part in research (partly because most of them saw themselves as their own bosses) professional women were more modest about the level of their participation. I suspect that some women avoided taking part in research because they were still connected to drug trafficking and were fearful of possible repercussions if they were seen to be speaking to an outsider about business.

### **Collecting data about gender and structure/agency**

Data about structure/agency and gender was collected using a mix of narrative interviewing and probing. In the context of this 'narrative landscape' the interview was both a threat and opportunity to the respondents' identity<sup>39</sup>. Thus listening to narratives and probing respondents demanded listening carefully and reflecting on the ways that respondents narratives reproduced, altered and deviated from the standard narratives which dominated the women's prison.

### **Gendered talk: standard narratives and going 'off-script'**

The narrative landscape in prison shaped the ways in which trafficking could be legitimately described in the context of female gender.

As described above, interviews usually started by giving respondents a chance to describe their experiences using their 'standard narrative'. These were more or less 'storied'. Some immediately took the chance to go 'off script' whilst some were more conventional

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<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Monica Skrinjar for drawing my attention to the role of the interview as a site of contested identities **Skrinjar, M.** 2008 'Gendered identity negotiations in qualitative interviews with drug users' *8th Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology*, Edinburgh.

tales replicating the scripts of strategic (gendered) victimisation described above. These carefully storied self-narratives had to be respected and given space to breathe.

Nonetheless, it was necessary to probe narratives to try and get beyond storied versions which had been carefully shaped and utilised in official contexts in prison. This was not done with the intention of getting at some non-storied, truthful or objective account, but rather to explore the contradictions, feelings, contexts, motives and justifications with respondents. This was a difficult process and one that had variable success. Although some respondents enjoyed the opportunity to look at their experience in a different light, others were relatively closed. This probably had as much to do with the research relationship as respondents' experience, personality and interest in reflecting on the past.

A probing style of interview gave the respondents opportunities to retell aspects of their story in different ways and to go 'off script'. Sometimes this could be fun: an opportunity to talk about the good experiences they may not have voiced publicly but sometimes this could be emotionally traumatic. Some had some unhappy memories of coercion and threats of violence related to trafficking. Furthermore, since for many women trafficking represented an escape, talking about life before could also be difficult. Often respondents got upset during interview: although I always offered to postpone the interview everyone said that they wanted to continue. Even though it was upsetting, many said that it was good and important to tell their story. Most respondents had mixed feelings about their experiences.

As insider/outsider I occupied a special place in the narrative landscape of prison. I had access to outside style, forms and topics of discussion. Sharing anecdotes, jokes, news and my own experiences helped to mutually construct an inter-subjective space that I hoped would allow them to construct their experiences in different ways.

Since respondents knew I was researching about women in the drug business, they may have fore fronted the gendered nature of their experiences. By setting out to research 'women and the drug business' the hypothesis that gender was an important factor in drug trafficking underpinned my research. I tried to make space in my analysis for a 'null hypothesis': that gender was not relevant. I interviewed men and women from different aspects of the drugs business to explore the role of gender from the perspectives of men and women and traffickers and mules.

Data about different aspects of gender emerged from narrative interviews. Gender appeared as gendered identities: femininities and masculinities were embedded in narratives, in particular in justifications and motivations for entry into drug trafficking. Gender also emerged as gender roles (in motives) and gendered relations (between contacts and mules).

## **Interviewing for structure/agency**

Structure and agency are ubiquitous in social research however making these academic terms meaningful in the context of this research was not easy. One respondent read an early report. He came back to me and asked what I meant by ‘agency’. My reply was not satisfactory and he declared agency to be a ‘bollocks term’. Given that the gap between theory and respondents’ lived experiences can be large, I had to work out a way to make these concepts meaningful in the course of research. Furthermore, since a collective identity of strategic victimisation dominated the narrative landscape of the women’s prison, I had to remain critical about how structure/agency was narrated and to what aim.

Initially data about structure and agency in respondents lives were found embedded in respondents narratives about involvement in drug trafficking. I tried to let these terms emerge from the data as far as possible, rather than assuming beforehand what these would mean in this context. Accordingly, in research I wanted to allow for as broad as possible a conception of both ‘agency’ and ‘structure’.

After collecting several narratives about being a mule and starting to probe them with respondents it became clear that there structure/agency became salient during two turning points: making the decision to get involved and trying to back out. These turning points could be probed usefully to elicit data about how coercion was achieved, negotiated and resisted. Probing interviews was not simply a case of getting respondents to go beyond simplistic adoption of victim-hood. Some respondents *were* coerced into trafficking and the idea of trying to get ‘beneath’ narratives was problematic. At worst, it could appear that I did not believe their account. To counter this, I encouraged respondents to explain how coercion was achieved and maintained at different stages of the process of trafficking drugs.

## **Data analysis**

‘Different data collection methods yield different information and they have to be interpreted differently.’ (Reissman 1993: 55). Different kinds of data were collected and have been employed in different ways in analysis.

Ethnographic observation yielded data about the narrative landscape in prisons. In ethnographic research the different stages of research (data collection and analysis) are not easily separable (Maher 1997: 207). Thus analysis of the prison context was conducted in the field and was honed through discussions with respondents.



This section describes how data from ethnographic interviews about experiences in the drug trade were analysed. I then discuss some potential problems with the kinds of data produced such as problems with relying on post-hoc accounts, interpretation and so on.

### **Turning stories to evidence**

‘Knowledge is a matter of perspective: there is no knowledge without someone who knows in a particular way. Knowledge is therefore a social phenomenon rather than simply a substance’ (Hastrup 2004: 466).

For respondents, the ‘facts’ of their narrative were facts: they were telling the ‘truth’ about trafficking and their place in it. Nonetheless, these facts come into being in the interview situation and as such they are dependent on the rules that define ‘knowledge’ in this particular social reality. Plausibility was contingent on our shared understandings and trusting relationship.

As researcher, I took these stories from prison, where they have a particular set of meanings and transferred them to the academic setting where they are imbued with another set of meanings. Before they were ‘the truth’ about experience; in the context of the thesis they become evidence to back up my academic claims to knowledge about the business. This transformation is largely achieved through the process of analysis.

### **Process of analysis**

The body of the thesis is composed of women’s narratives about mule work. Aside from identifying broad themes and key ‘turning points’ in narratives, very little analysis or development of theory was possible in the field. This was due partly to the time consuming and intense nature of field research as well as the fact that ‘being there’ largely precludes gaining analytical distance. In short, ‘in the immediacy of the moment...research is what is happening to someone else in some other time. The here and now dictates how you act and in a certain way in order that you pass safely from the current crisis and in all probability into the next one.’ (Winlow, et al. 2001: 546).

Once out of the field, analysis was a lengthy process. Whereas fieldwork was driven by immersion in place and relationships with respondents, analysis involved immersion in interview data. In keeping with the ethnographic theme, analysis was done in a way to try and avoid making ‘too much rational sense out of this irrational world’ (Adler 1993: 9).

The first stage of analysis was to exclude a large body of data from analysis. During fieldwork a large body of data was collected on the theme of women in the drug trade. After an initial review of all the data collected, I decided to focus on drug mules and in particular women drug mules since I had a long standing interest in sociological theories of gender. Furthermore, writing about drug mules allowed me to write in relation to an existing body of empirical research about women in the drug trade. As I outlined earlier in the thesis, there has been little rigorous research on women or gender in the drug trade. Data which I collected on sexism in the drug trade and career development of mules was excluded from the analysis that forms this thesis. Although these themes were interesting and are worthy of exploration there was simply no space to include them in this thesis. Note that the conclusion includes a consideration of future avenues of research which discusses potential avenues for research which emerged from an early analysis of this data.

I analysed women's narratives about mule work according to principles of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is not one method but encompasses a broad spectrum of analyses which attend to the narrative aspects of data (Reissman 1993: 5). This analysis falls broadly into the 'socio-cultural' approach: 'the assumptions underpinning this approach are that stories not only reflect culture, ideology and socialisation, but also provide insights into the political and historical climates impacting on the storytellers' (Grbich 2006: 130).

Initially, each interview was subject to a close reading to analyse the internal 'sense' of each case and to understand the variety of meanings suspended throughout the text. Key sections were highlighted and themes were annotated in the margin. Finally, a 'pro-forma' for each mule was compiled to examine the meanings suspended in the text.

Highlighting the narrative aspects of interview data precludes reading simply for content or simply as evidence of a prior theory (Reissman 1993: 61). By asking 'why was the story told in this way?' I was forced to explore many implicit aspects of the narration: understanding the immediate context of data production (the interview) as well as the wider context (prison, politics etc). The pro-forma summed up different aspect of the interview data such as:

- A plot summary of events,
- Key social actors,
- Key theoretical points/themes
- Analysis of the narrative style, devices and discourses employed
- What was not said, implicit meanings or silences
- Respondent's position and role in prison
- Observations about the interviews (what else was going on, the setting etc).

A database of 'factual' data was also compiled:

- Length of sentence

- The portion of the sentence served at the point of interview
- What and how much they were arrested with
- What roles they had occupied in drug trafficking.

These were used to consider how the interview was 'shaped' in the context of prison and each respondent's place in it. This allowed for a reflexive interpretation of each interview to understand the multiple meanings embedded in the narrative: both as a description of events and a construction of self.

Following an in-depth, in-case analysis of each interview, I began to analyse interviews in small groups or paired up similar experiences between male and female traffickers. Rather than dividing the data thematically, analysis and presentation is chronological. In addition to addressing theoretical questions of structure/agency, this structure of analysis and presentation was chosen since an important part of the thesis is to describe what mule-work is. This also makes explicit how structures of power and control are formed and reinforced during 'mule-work'.

Data relating to each 'stage' in women's involvement in trafficking were collated in several word documents which correspond to the substantive chapters. These were then read for trends and differences and eventually transformed into chapters. Final analysis and writing were one and the same process. Excerpts from interview data which appear in the thesis were chosen to represent as broad a spectrum of speakers as possible.

### **Reliance on post-hoc accounts: motives and rationalisation**

Hobbs warns that: 'total reliance upon accounts of ex-criminals, as they recount halcyon days of honourable gore and filthy lucre is dangerous.' (1995: 4). However, what this research does (which research with traffickers in prison has not done before) is to try and understand the way that accounts are constructed and the different meanings implied. This reflexive analysis will hopefully guard against presenting any 'rose-tinted' view as straight fact. Nonetheless, 'there is no such thing as an authentic experience unmediated by interpretation. Stories, narratives, accounts do not remain unchanged but are edited, rewritten and interpreted away from the social relationships in which they occurred.' (Burman et al. 2001: 454). Nonetheless 'for practical, methodological reasons there is also no choice but to listen to stories... Personal stories told by ordinary people to researchers are, of course, also not the whole or the only possible story. This is not suggesting an inevitable contradiction between the story and the reality, but refers to a more complex relationship between stories and lives.' (Jamieson 1998: 12).

This is most pertinent regarding the subtle differences between what respondents identify as motivations and justifications. Nonetheless, the relationship between motives and justifications is complex: ‘Motives are accepted justifications for present, future or past programs or acts. To terms them justifications is *not* to deny their efficacy. Often anticipations of acceptable justifications will control conduct. [...] Such diplomacy does not necessarily imply intentional lie. It merely indicates that an appropriate vocabulary of motives will be utilised – that there are conditions for certain lines of conduct.’ (Wright Mills 1940: 907). Furthermore, motives may be multiple or re-constructed according to locally available vocabularies of motive (or narrative landscape). Thus as the actor travels, motives/justifications may be reformulated (for example outside of prison, in a courtroom, in private with an interviewer). Thus, analysis had to remain open to the possibility of multiple and contradictory motives and justifications in respondents’ replies.

### **Context and interpretation: reflexivity in analysis**

‘Outside researchers often report the phonetics of crime without understanding its syntax or semantics’ (Hobbs 1995: 3). Ethnographic research has commonly sought to tackle this by engaging with the site in which meaning is created (Denton 2001: 5). In the same way, this research engages in the meaning-making process and contexts of prisons in Ecuador.

Long term ethnographic engagement facilitated repeat interviews (some over the span of years) and to understand the complex ways in which narratives of imprisonment/being a drug trafficker/being male or female are intertwined. In short: ‘it is through sustaining a long term presence in the research field that the kind of disparity between representation and reality can be recognised and understood.’ (Crewe 2006: 365). Appreciating the complex chemistry of place, history, biography and the meaning of talk (essentially the subject of ethnographic enquiry) does much to avoid misinterpretation or distortion of respondents’ experiences’ (Denton 2001: 5). Thus, narrative analysis avoids the possibility of simplistic interpretations of respondents’ narratives out of context.

### **‘Most traffickers don’t get caught’: representativeness of sample**

A common criticism of prison-based research is that imprisoned respondents are not representative of the wider picture of crime. Specifically in the case of drug mules, arrest profiles affect who appears in arrest statistics. In Ecuador, bribery of police and judges by traffickers meant that some traffickers could buy themselves out of jail. Two men who I

interviewed who recruited mules firmly stated that they had never had any of their mules arrested. Furthermore, the question of representativeness is unanswerable given the impossibility of quantitatively measuring the population of people involved in drug trafficking due to it being a crime which is both truly global and hidden. Nonetheless, the alternative - research on the 'outside' - can only reflect a limited reality: Adler's account is only American, high-end operators (1993); Zaitch's account is only of Colombian drug importers in the Netherlands (2002). Both of these studies have produced invaluable data however the ethnographic method cannot ever claim to be representative of large scale (or even global-scale) phenomena: 'no fieldwork of this nature can make claims of universal representativeness but it does show what can and does exist' (Denton 2001: 18, see also (Blaikie 2000: 253-6).

Given that this research seeks to explore drug trafficking as an activity, rather than to profile drug traffickers as a specific type of person or subsection of the population, a better question than representativeness might be how the thesis is shaped by the limitations of the data collection process. The fact of arrest imposed a need to narrate one's story. This has a profound effect of the kind of data that was collected. A mule who had never been caught would not have had to form a narrative to explain/justify their temporary employment as a mule. One respondent told me of one woman who he 'helped her out' by organising for her to work as a mule. She was a single parent with significant debts and three children. She made the trip successfully, paid off her debts and returned to her ordinary life. Her story (and the stories of women like her) is sadly missing from this thesis and from research more widely on drug mules.

### **Authority and interpretation**

The following account is my interpretation of the experiences of many women who participated in drug trafficking. Countless interpretations of the data are/were possible (Reissman 1993: 42). Data is presented to follow the structure of respondents' narratives of getting involved in the drug trade and doing the job of being a mule. I am critical of the researcher's role in 'giving voice' (Reissman 1993: 8). Many respondents have loud, eloquent, confident voices of their own and are not reliant on me as their 'voice'.

Although interview methods placed the respondent as expert on drug trafficking, they participated in the understanding that I was also an 'expert' in my field. My position as researcher allows me to span the gap between outside/inside; prison and academia. Since my position as insider/outsider facilitated my access to both drug trafficking and academic

worlds, so it facilitates making respondents accounts public. As such, I am not overly uneasy about the power imbalance between respondents and myself in this final account although I have tried to be reflexive about this relationship throughout writing and analysis.

I have tried to interpret interviews as reflectively as possible in the spirit in which the interview was conducted: openly and honestly. I have employed methodologies which let the data breathe to avoid fitting data into academic concepts that are more or less meaningful in the context of respondents' experiences. I hope that respondents will not find my representations of them too basic, heartless or inaccurate. Although they have done their best to inform me, any faults are my own.

### **Researching men**

The men's and women's prisons were distinct and so were the methods of research employed. Nonetheless, there was more similarity than difference overall. Although my insistence that I was a feminist researcher was largely misconstrued ('You're researching women's lib in the drugs business!'), nonetheless, the same reflexivity in relation to power and the meaning of talk in prison applied, regardless of whether I appeared to be researching 'up' or 'down'. Smith and Wincup warn against simplistic assumptions regarding gender and power relations (2000: 341). Not only were power relations cross-cut with a variety of other dimensions (insider/outsider, researcher/researched, host/visitor etc) but they were fluid, flexible and resisted simple binary categorisation.

Ethnographic observation was a useful tool in the men's prison where drug trafficking impacted (and was part of) daily prison life and culture. This allowed for spontaneous discussion about how the business worked with individuals and groups. Often formal interviews developed out of informal discussions although not always.

Since I interviewed men from diverse aspects of the drug trade (this is detailed in Appendices three and four), interviews were varied. In particular, interviewing professional and continuing traffickers necessitated reflexive practice. These structured conversations placed the respondent as an expert in the business and me as the student. Usually I asked general questions about the process of sending mules, or what it was like to work with women. Sometimes respondents kept their answers generalised, other times they illustrated their perspective with short anecdotes. Occasionally, men would give a chronological record of events.

Lastly given the legal limits on the data I could collect (see Appendix two), I was careful to remind respondents not to give any identifying details about their experiences.

Names were represented in notes as shapes and tape recorders were used with only three respondents with their explicit permission<sup>40</sup>.

### **Sum up data collected**

Below is a summary of data collected. Further information about the number of respondents interviewed is provided in appendices (three and four).

### **Ethnographic observation**

Ethnography is an 'inclusive method' (Wilson 2006: 6); the number of people involved in the ethnographic aspects of fieldwork is impossible to quantify. I visited prison 4 days a week over the course of a year; a total of 162 visits during 2006. Ethnographic observations were recorded daily as field-notes (which total just fewer than 200 pages).

### **Ethnographic interviews**

The majority of interview data comes from 2006 fieldwork. I have also included data from research in 2003. This adds to the breadth rather than the depth to the thesis rather since interviews were not driven by the same theoretical concerns of this thesis. Some respondents participated in research in 2003 and 2006.

In total, 19 women were formally interviewed about their participation in drug trafficking. In 2003 I interviewed seven women. Four had left prison by the time I returned and the remaining three were interviewed again. I interviewed a further 11 women in prison. I also interviewed one woman outside prison who had been offered a chance to traffic drugs but had turned it down.

In total, 18 men were formally interviewed. In 2003, I interviewed six men about drug trafficking. Three continued to participate in research. In 2006 I formally interviewed a further 11 men in prison. I also interviewed one man outside prison about training to be a mule.

In total, 61 distinct interviews were conducted in 2006. Some respondents were interviewed only once, others as many as five times. These were usually with one person but occasionally with two or three respondents. Transcripts of interviews total around 200,000 words.

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<sup>40</sup> These respondents encouraged and assisted me to apply for a temporary pass to being in a tape recorder for just 2 days.

A 'standard' account here would have included demographic data about respondents: their marital status, ages, nationalities, ages, ethnicities. Although I have done this as part of the analysis, it is not appropriate here. In addition to concerns about confidentiality (since such details would identify respondents, especially nationality), this information perpetuates the idea that traffickers are a 'type' of people, rather than trying to understand trafficking as a type of activity.

### **Chapter conclusion**

I have tried to problematise the data: rather than transparent conveyors of information, respondents are involved in the daily prison hustle as well as the complex business of narrating oneself in isolation from 'ordinary life'. Extracted from the usual aspects of life which compose a 'self', trafficking narratives are important ways of staking claims to agency and legitimacy in the prison context. Furthermore, personal narratives of being a trafficker are shaped by the narrative landscape of prison in complex ways which encourage acceptable constructions of femininities, masculinities, victimisation and volition. Being aware of these is an important aspect of a reflexive and rigorous interpretation of respondents' accounts which I hope does much to avoid simplistic and two dimensional conceptions of agency/structure and gender.

Any account of fieldwork will necessarily conceal more than it reveals: 'there are many aspects of the research experience in prisons which seem so important at the time of the visit but which later do not fit easily in any analysis' (Bosworth 1999: 70). This account inevitably excludes the many aspects of human engagement that develop over prolonged periods of contact and which were so central to this research project and process. Nonetheless, the messy human engagement that counts as fieldwork will inevitably infuse this account in other ways.



## INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

The following chapters describe the findings of the research. They are organised in a chronological order. Presenting findings as a sequence of events allows the reader to see the complex ways in which structure and agency are set up and change the conditions in which mule-work takes place. By mirroring the ways in which mules tell their story, I hope to retain a degree of integrity to their narratives. Before embarking on the empirical portion of this thesis, it is necessary to set out, unequivocally, the terms which I use in my description and analysis.

### **Defining drug traffic and traffickers**

Overuse of the word ‘drug trafficker’ in political discourse and popular culture has reduced the term to a shorthand cue for violence, corruption, menace and greed. Furthermore, idiosyncratic use of these terms in academic writing has often created ambiguity rather than clarity (see Olmo 1993). ‘Trafficking’ and has been used to describe anything from growing the plants from which drugs are produced to street level dealing and everything in between. Furthermore, there is little common agreement on the terminology: smuggler, trafficker, carrier, courier and mule have been used interchangeably to refer to people involved in different aspects of the drug trade. The result is that the terms trafficking and traffickers have been degraded through imprecise use to become ‘meaningless words’ (Orwell 1953).

### **Drug Trafficking:**

The drug trafficking described in the following chapters is cocaine trafficking by mule from Latin America to the rest of the world. The ‘traffic’ here includes all activities directly related to the import/export of drugs with mules: those who buy the drugs which will be trafficked, recruit, supervise and organise for drugs to be carried by mule. It does not include wholesale brokering or cross-border trafficking in Latin America, or wholesale, distribution or retail after the drugs leave Ecuador.

Although I expected to only research cocaine trafficking, some mules were also carrying heroin. None of the organisers I interviewed admitted to trafficking in heroin. Only a small portion of the world’s heroin comes from Colombia (UNODC 2008). Interviews with respondents suggested that since heroin trafficking was not large enough to support a separate industry heroin was exported by the same networks.

**Drug traffickers:**

Empirical research with traffickers has shown that there are a number of roles involved in trafficking (see Matrix Knowledge Group 2007). Unlike previous research, this thesis focuses on mules. They used their own set of terms to refer to the different roles involved. The terms provided below have emerged from respondents themselves. These same terms were also used by respondents who occupied other roles, especially those who recruit and organise mules. These roles are not mutually exclusive. Diversification is largely a function of the size of a drug trafficking organisation. I found that roles in drug trafficking fell into two loose categories: organisation and auxiliary.

**Organisational roles:**

**Investor:** person who provides the financial investment to send drugs by mule. This includes paying for travel, the hotel and the drugs. The investor may also pay auxiliary workers. There may be more than one investor. The mule may or may not meet this person.

**Contact:** Mules usually had two contacts. The first was their first initial contact (usually in their home country) who organises for the mule to travel. They usually recruited mules (although this role could also be done by an investor or a specialist). Mules had a second contact in Ecuador. This contact fulfilled a range of jobs: supervising mules, providing them with spending money. They also made sure that the mule left with the drugs.

**Auxiliary roles:**

**Mule:** person who physically carries the drugs across international borders. Readers should note that I use the term 'mule' to refer to individuals who *knowingly* transport drugs bought by someone else across international borders. This includes different methods of carrying (capsules, strapped to bodies, sewn into clothes or packed into shoes, luggage or items in the luggage). Not all mules I interviewed expected to be paid (in cash, drugs or any material form) and as such I do not include payment in any material sense as an aspect of mule work. I intend that this term exclude the small group of people who are 'set up': who unknowingly carry drugs across international borders.

**Experienced mule:** a person who has worked as a mule several times. Their experience sets them apart from the first time mules. I use the term 'experienced' indicate their previous success.

**Mule recruiter:** Person paid by contacts or traffickers in larger scale trafficking organisations to find and recruit mules. They act as a broker of information and money between the organisers and mules. They may also be responsible if mules abscond with drugs, money or try to otherwise back out.

**Mule watcher:** Someone employed (in larger operations) to travel with a mule or groups of mules to travel with the mules and watch them unseen.

## CHAPTER 6: MAKING CONTACTS: HOW MULES GET INTO TRAFFICKING

### Amanda's story

Amanda is sitting at her mother's kitchen table. Her ma is at work and the kids are in bed upstairs. She shuffles the bills around the table again. Any way she adds it up it just won't add up. \$3000 is an impossible amount to pay: no savings, no job. To make it worse, she has no place of her own, the kids need new clothes and all she has to look forward to is a court appearance next week. Last time the judge said that if she couldn't pay she had to go to jail. Her kids have only one parent, so right now jail is just not an option. She lights a cigarette, exhales and tries to steady her nerves enough to make a plan but all she can really think about is that she would kill that son of a bitch ex-husband if she could find him now, or at least make *him* pay his share of the bills. With him out of the picture at last maybe they could move on: maybe get a place of their own, just her and the kids, a fresh start.

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To cut a long story short, I lost my job after [my country hit an economic crisis], a month later, in October. Well practically a lot of people did. The economy was terrible. It was like red light all over [the city]. [...] I already told you I was like an alcoholic basically, you know. I started going out into the world, into the bars n stuff like that n talking to people n I started beginning to know about the type of person [my husband] was n everything so I decided to leave him. I decided to leave him n I went to my mum's house n left my apartment that I had suffered to get by going through a shelter with my three kids, because I didn't have the last one yet. For 7 months. [...] I was all by myself during that time and I left that apartment to give it to [my husband], to give him time to leave.

So I agreed to that, I stayed in this little room with my mom and my 4 kids. 4 months later, he called n was like yeah, he's leaving. I go back to my apartment and find nothing there, He took my furniture, he took my sofas, my bedroom set, a TV in my son's room. So I called him n cursed him out n um, the landlord comes to me n tells me... No I get this letter that I have to go to court, apparently I owe \$4000 in rent for the 4 months I haven't been there.... The light bill was \$1000, a little over and the gas, you know. So I'm like I have 4 kids to take care of, what am I gonna do? You know.

\*\*\*\*

She creeps upstairs and cracks the door open just a little so she can see her kids sleeping, cramped up in her old room. She leans on the door jam; remembers bringing her first son back to that same room after the hospital. She was just fifteen then. Her heart tugs

at her. She loves them all so much, and she has fought so hard for them: she remembers the 7 months they spent in the shelter waiting for a real home, carrying her son to hospital on the underground train, giving birth to her twins...

She closes the door slowly, slowly and tiptoes downstairs. She grabs her coat and keys and shuts the front door quietly behind her.

\*\*\*\*

Janine was a friend of the family for years. She was my sister's best friend. So Janine and my sister used to hang out. A lot. You know, my sister would go dancing with her and everything. My sister was always out there and um, Janine's daughter used to go to my kids' school so I used to meet up with her for our kids to play together and I'm the type of person, if I know you, from like years ago, I'll still go see you, if I see you I'll be like hey! What you been up to? I'll go visit you, have a cup of tea, have a cup of coffee and um I didn't see no harm in it. I knew her father sold drugs though so I'd always stay in the house minimum an hour n leave and um since I was into *that* at that time so we would steal her father's stash and just, get high.

[One time] she was like, I'm going to Ecuador. I was like what're you talking about? [...] She was like yeah..., they're gonna pay me \$9000. I was like 'what are you nuts? With the security that's in the airports now cause of this terrorist thing that's going on? [She said] 'Yeah, but they can't detect it, the dogs can't even detect it.' She went through with it n I saw her months later. I think 2 months later I would say and ... she got away with it.

So, after I had that hearing with the judge and the judge said I have a week to come up with the money, and I'm like with all my bills in front of me in the kitchen table. I can't eat, I cannot sleep, I started to smoke cigarettes. My kids are sleeping. I walk 2 blocks over to her house n just knock on her door. I go upstairs and her boyfriend was in her bed, she was there. 'I wanna do it'. They're like 'Are you sure?' 'Yes, I'm sure'.

In a week's time I had my passport, I had a thousand dollars 'n I had directions of what to do when I get to Ecuador.

\*\*\*\*

I told you about [my husband] right? And about how [he] drove me crazy? I told you about me n my rent my kids n everything like that. I don't know. I guess I was thinking selfishly... [...] I don't know, thinking very selfishly. You know it hurts me when I think about that... I wasn't thinking... just thinking to get away from everything.[...]

The hardest thing is gonna be for me to explain this to my kids.... explain it to them. Why did mommy leave you for so long? Why you only could have heard her voice and asked to see her in your dreams? Hmm mmm. But you can't see her. [pause].

But it's like I wasn't only a mother to my kids. I was a mother to [my husband]. I was a mother to my *mother*; I was a mother to... I was just tired, I was too tired... [...] [I] put those invisible barriers up, like yeah there's no way out. I never put that before in my life. There was always a way out for me.

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*Amanda was arrested on her first trafficking trip before she even boarded the aeroplane in Quito. She has completed her sentence and is with her family.*

### **Introduction: victims or volunteers?**

Understanding how women come to be involved in drug trafficking networks is important to address the key question of this thesis: whether women mules are victims or agents. This chapter examines the process of women's entry into drug trafficking as a mule.

Unlike previous studies of women mules, this chapter also incorporates data from male mules and professional traffickers to unpack the relationship between gender and victimisation more clearly than looking at female mules would allow.

### **Victimisation and recruitment of mules**

The question of how women mules are already or become connected to drug trafficking networks has been almost completely unexplored (Dorn et al. 2005: iv). This neglect reflects the widespread assumption that 'the role of women in the "drug underworld" is assumed to be a passive one, a role also involving victimisation' (Ruggiero and South 1995: 138).

Women's pathways into the drug trade have been largely ignored or understood in ways that relate only to their victimisation. Furthermore, since research on mules has focussed almost exclusively on female mules, victimisation has been bound up with female gender. Women mules have been generally understood as 'tricked, trapped or compelled' (Sudbury 2005: 181) into working as a mule by a (male) trafficker who seeks to exploit them. Penny Green offers an analysis of the gendered dynamic of recruitment in a section titled 'Young girls and bad guys':

'From the few cases of young female couriers cited here it would seem that some of the attractions of youth lifestyle, combined with the existence and pressure from boyfriends and other more powerful men in their lives (loan sharks, landlords, for example) involvement in the drug scene, economic need, lack of experience, lack of resources and relative powerlessness were instrumental in their recruitment into the drugs trade.' (Green 1998: 98).

Thus, the role of gendered relationships (and gendered power-relations) may play an important role in women's recruitment into mule-work. This chapter explores *if* and *how* gendered structures of powerlessness and domination may combine to facilitate women's entry into drug trafficking not only through force and coercion but potentially a variety of

ways. Furthermore, I will also present data from male mules who were similarly coerced into trafficking in order to try and untangle the relationship between coercion and gender<sup>41</sup>. This chapter seeks to answer several questions about the role of victimisation in mules' recruitment:

If women are 'tricked, trapped or compelled' into mule-work, is this experience shared by all mules? What about male mules? Furthermore, if mules are tricked and trapped into drug trafficking, what social structures or norms of social interaction make this possible? Is gender the most significant social structure? How might age, generation, having a family, dealing drugs or being a drug user also create or close off opportunities to become a mule?

### **Mules as volunteers**

Although the majority of available literature contends that women participate in drug trafficking as a result of victimisation, it is necessary to also consider that women may also become involved in drug trafficking out of their own volition. Taking this hypothesis seriously, it is necessary to consider how women or men seeking mule work might be connected to someone who can connect them to drug trafficking networks.

Recent studies of imprisoned traffickers have started to explore pathways into trafficking (Decker and Chapman 2008; Matrix Knowledge Group 2007). Despite the absence of women in these studies<sup>42</sup>, this research identifies possible 'mechanics of entry' into drug trafficking networks (Matrix Knowledge group 2007). Rather than a formal or purposive 'recruitment' Decker and Chapman highlight the importance of relationships and everyday activities:

'Most of our subjects got involved in drug smuggling because of their friendships with or relational links to individuals already involved in smuggling. Indeed, the pattern of everyday life – which includes contact with or bonds to blood relatives, affiliation ties with workers or neighbours, or links to persons who can perform reciprocal favours – works to create opportunities for recruitment into drug smuggling. After all it is unlikely for a stranger to be approached on the street and asked to assist in a drug smuggling effort.' (2008: 96).

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<sup>41</sup> I did not purposefully seek out either men or women who were coerced into drug trafficking. Nonetheless, it is likely that both men and women who were coerced into drug trafficking may have sought me out as a resource for validation – see Chapter 4. Despite the prevalence of the coercion narrative in the women's prison, those who were coerced into trafficking were clearly pleased to find a sympathetic listener to hear their story.

<sup>42</sup> Women and mules are completely absent in one study (Decker and Chapman 2008) and in the extreme minority in another (5% of respondents in the Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007).

This chapter explores if and how ‘relationships and everyday activities’ offer routes into drug trafficking. It will explore how gender structures may create or block off opportunities for entry into drug trafficking as a mule and will be open to how other structures intersect with gender to connect men and women to opportunities to work as a drugs mule. This chapter considers the importance of ethnic or kin networks and in particular will consider whether these propel men and women into working as a mule in the same way. This chapter also explores what other routine or everyday activities women participate in which might create links to the drug trafficking business and therefore the opportunity to traffic drugs.

Lastly, this chapter will explore how sexism might affect women’s participation in the drug trade. On one hand sexism might prevent women entering the drug trade (Steffensmeier 1983). On the other hand it has also been claimed that drug traffickers seek to specifically recruit women ‘because they are likely to have clean records, create less suspicion and can conceal drugs more easily’. (1983: 1025).

### **‘Who you know’: personal contacts and connections to drug trafficking**

Having a personal link to drug trafficking networks is crucial in ‘recruitment’ (Decker and Chapman 2008:96; see also (Ianni 1974) and Matrix Knowledge Group (2007)).

The networks which facilitate the drugs business are largely formed through personal introductions to ensure the secrecy and success of the business. All mules were recruited through a key ‘contact’<sup>43</sup> who was the link between the mule and the investors/organisers. No matter how large or small the drug trafficking organisation, the mule was dependent on one person for their entry into drug.

The majority of contacts were not new but already known through existing social and personal networks. Often these were not from ethnic/kin networks as has been hypothesised but came through a diverse variety of activities and relationships not exclusively centred around the drugs business: in short, connections to the drugs business came in more diverse forms than has been previous hypothesised.

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<sup>43</sup> Similarly, professional traffickers relied on contacts to move up the hierarchy into organisational roles and for broadening the scope and capabilities of their organisation through increased contacts. This is beyond the scope of this thesis however.



## **Friends of friends and partners**

Three mules were offered the opportunity to work as a mule through friends of friends (Caroline, Bonny, and Anika).

Caroline was a North American exchange student who attended a high school in Ecuador for a year to learn Spanish. While she was in Ecuador she met a man who became her boyfriend and later her husband. Her contacts were friends of her boyfriend.

Our plan was to get married. We came back [to Ecuador], met the wrong people, a group of Colombians and I swallowed almost a kilo of heroin. (Caroline, 2003 p.7).

Caroline's boyfriend's friends made her an offer to work as a mule when they were in a local internet café. They were talking about drug trafficking, asked if she wanted to get involved and she agreed. Although her boyfriend's friends made the offer of trafficking drugs, her boyfriend was not involved.

## **Romantic partners: boyfriends and fiancés**

Romantic partners also acted as 'contacts' to the drugs business (Marta, Manuela and one 'experienced' mule: Catalina<sup>44</sup>). Marta was asked to do a trip as a mule by her boyfriend who was the 'boss' of a drug trafficking organisation that sent mules all over the world. Their relationship was complex: a subtle balance of dependence and obligation were already in place long before the offer of mule-work came up.

Following the death of her father, Marta started taking crack cocaine regularly and hung around 'the ghetto' with her boyfriend and his friends. She became involved with robbing houses with them; eventually they were all arrested, imprisoned and she was deported with her daughter who was under five at the time. She met a man on the same flight who asked about her plans once she arrived in the country in which she was born but had never lived:

He's like where are you gonna go? I just broke into tears, girl. I got 20 bucks in my pocket, I've got all my clothes and my daughter's clothes, my [...] daughter and I ain't got nowhere to go. I ain't got no phone numbers. I got nothing. He's like, well come hang out with me. I'm like whoa...I mean you don't do that kind of stuff in [this country]. I'm like, OK what other opportunity do I have? (Marta p.169)

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<sup>44</sup> Catalina's story of falling in love and getting involved in drug trafficking is too long and complicated to be included here. However the basic details are the same: her primary contact into drug trafficking is her boyfriend who also organised drug trafficking operations.

Following this chance encounter Marta and her daughter stayed with this man and eventually Marta became involved with him romantically. Although she knew that he was involved in the drugs business and sent other women as mules, she did not have any wish to make any trips herself. However after they had been together for a while he proposed that she make a trip as a mule. The original plan was to make a trip for him (with his investment) although in the end she made the trip for his friend as there was more money to be made.

Although the offer was presented to Martha as a free choice, she also said:

In a way that I owed these people [boyfriend and his family]. They took me into their home and they were feeding me and my daughter. One way or the other I made my own decision, it was my own choice, put it that way. But in the way he looked at me and said can you do this? I couldn't say no either.

JF: It's like a subtle form of persuasion.

[...]

Yeah, but more than that cause they treated me nicely and my daughter too. I couldn't sit there and wait for someone else to collect the cash. I was always independent in relationships. I was always the one with the money so I felt kind of helpless and.... What's the word... (long pause).

JF: Frustrated?

Oh, very, I was very frustrated.

JF: So, what did having the money mean to you?

[pauses to think] Control and independence. (p. 216/7)

Although the offer of mule-work was presented as a free choice, she already felt indebted to her boyfriend. As she states: 'I couldn't sit there and wait for someone else to collect the cash'; she felt a sense of responsibility for herself and felt keenly indebted to her boyfriend for looking after her when she had no material resources or prospect of a legal job. The obligation was implicit; her boyfriend might not have intended her to feel obliged but she certainly did.

Similarly, Manuela was asked to work as a mule by her boyfriend (although the contacts were her boyfriend's friends). She was working as a prostitute when she met her boyfriend; he became increasingly angry about her working as a prostitute and asked her to stop. He suggested that she make a trip as a mule (initially to Brazil). After she accepted the trafficking trip and agreed to give up prostitution he treated her well and she felt like they were in love and starting a new future together.

The obligation from her boyfriend was explicit. She described how he treated her with love again when she agreed to traffic: he had withdrawn his affection for her making clear that his affection was a reward for her cooperation. It is very difficult to tell whether or

not this manipulation was planned before they came involved however the balance of power likely lay with her partner. Manuela is learning-disabled. Although I would like to avoid drawing overly simplistic conclusions about her victimhood, being taken care of and having a stable life situation were particularly meaningful for her; during the interview she talked about how she considered herself to be getting too old to be a successful prostitute and worried about how she would support herself in the future.

### **Offer from an acquaintance**

One respondent, Frank, was offered a job of mule work from an acquaintance:

We used to go to restaurants, bars n so on then he said ‘Do you want to earn a few bucks?’ ‘Yeah, why not’. [It was a] free holiday and because I spoke Spanish. Anyway...he latched onto me, he knew I was skint n I spoke Spanish and I said yeah. (p.286)

In contrast to the examples above, Frank was only loosely acquainted with his contact. After Frank’s arrest his contact was able to disappear, free of the kinds of social ties (kin, location, work etc) which conventionally hold people in contact. The offer was presented to him as an opportunity; in many ways resembling a conventional (if informal) offer of casual work. There was little obligation provided by either the social relationship or the conditions in which the offer was made.

Interestingly, no women were offered a job of mule-work through a casual acquaintance from hanging out in bars, similarly though Mandalina was similarly approached by a customer in a bar that she worked in.

### **Cold call**

Although it is widely agreed upon by those working in the trade that unconnected mules were risky to employ, rarely mules may be actively recruited through a ‘cold call’:

In my country I was with my boyfriend and when he went home I was broke, no money so I worked in a bar. I met an African guy and he asked me if I wanted to work. I asked what work? He said do this, do this... it was drug traffic. (Mandalina p.238)

Prior to this, Mandalina was living with her boyfriend who she also described as African. I probed her about how she knew this man who gave her the offer since I wondered if they were connected:

I didn't know him so well but when I was living... [...] I lived with Africans before. I know what they do. (p.239)

It is impossible to know for certain how 'cold' this offer was: it is possible that her contact knew her boyfriend or knew that she had worked as a 'mule watcher' before. Unlike other women mules however, the offer came from a relative stranger and thus had little obligation attached.

### **Through successful mules**

Two women mules (Tanya and Amanda) became involved with trafficking through women that they knew who were successful mules. Both Tanya and Amanda actively sought out the opportunity to work as a mule. After some thought, they found their contact through successful mules.

Tanya met a woman who had successfully worked as a mule many years before while she was selling drugs in nightclubs. She had visited the woman's home and commented it was nice and noted the expensive things. This woman told her that she had made some trips to London to pick up some 'stuff'. She later found out that this stuff was drugs (although she does not mention what in particular). Several years later, after a series of life-changing events, she sought out the opportunity to work as a mule through the successful mule she had met.

Amanda initiated the start of the verbal contract to agree to traffic drugs. Her friend had worked successfully as a mule:

[She] was a friend of the family for years. She was my sister's best friend. So [she] and my sister used to hang out. A lot. You know, my sister would go dancing with her and everything. My sister was always out there and um, her daughter used to go to my kids' school so I used to meet up with her for our kids to play together and I'm the type of person, if I know you, from like years ago, I'll still go see you, if I see you I'll be like hey! What you been up to? I'll go visit you, have a cup of tea, have a cup of coffee and um I didn't see no harm in it. I knew her father sold drugs though so I'd always stay in the house minimum an hour n leave and um since I was into that at that time so we would steal her father's stash and just, get high.

She was like, 'I'm going to Ecuador. I was like what're you talking about?' 'N that was December. She was like 'yeah, they're gonna pay me \$9000'. I was like 'What?! Are you nuts?' [...]

She went through with it n I saw her months later. I think 2 months later I would say and ... she got away with it.

So after I had that hearing with the judge [about overdue rent and bills] and the judge said I have a week to come up with the money. I'm like with all my bills in front of me in the kitchen table. I can't eat, I cannot sleep, I started to smoke cigarettes. My kids are sleeping. I walk 2 blocks over to her house n just knock on her door. I go upstairs and her boyfriend [the contact] was in her bed, she was there. 'I wanna do it'. They're like 'are you sure?' 'Yes, I'm sure'. In a week's time I had my passport, I had \$1000 'n I had directions of what to do when I get to Ecuador. (Amanda p. 63).

Both Tanya and Amanda sought out their contact only once they had decided to make the trip. Both were acquainted with a successful mule through everyday activities (drug dealing) and relational ties (family friend). Using these ties, they were able to develop a chain of relationships which brought them to a contact who could organise for them to work as a mule.

### **Drugs business contacts**

Some mules had worked in the drugs industry in other areas which led to their working as drugs mules.

Graham was in his early twenties when he was arrested in Ecuador as a drugs mule. Before that he had a long career in the drugs business. After selling drugs (including heroin) at street-level, Graham's initial involvement with international trafficking came when a friend (and fellow drug dealer) was arrested and imprisoned in Latin America. Graham's friend organised for small packages of drugs to be sent from Ecuador inside magazines. Graham received these, sold them on, sent a portion of the profits to his friend in jail and kept a further portion of the profits for himself. This worked smoothly until Graham's brother opened a package, sold the drugs and spent the profits. Graham was offered the opportunity to work as a mule to pay back the debt incurred. Graham's 'contact' was someone that he knew well: they grew up together, hung out, attended High School and sold drugs together. Graham was connected to his contact through business' ties but also through shared history and friendship.

In the end Graham was double crossed by his friend: this inevitably shaped the way he described the relationship with his contact. Furthermore, the way that his involvement in

trafficking was described tended to highlight different aspects of their history depending on who he was speaking to at the time and accordingly how he chose to present himself. This is something that could be observed and understood only through a prolonged period of engagement with respondents.

Donna is one of the few experienced mules who participated in this research. Like Graham, she was initially involved in the drug trade as a dealer (through connections she gained through hanging out in the Latin community and nightlife). She initially moved into international drug trafficking as a recruiter finding mules to work for a friend and fellow drug dealer. When she could not find someone to work as a mule she decided to do the job herself.

This was also echoed by others with experience working in the drugs trade. Bobby was working as part of an organisation which he described as a small cartel. He also recruited mules. When a mule dropped out, he decided to do the job himself since time was very short to find a reliable replacement.

Interestingly, working as a mule was not part of a straightforward career progression: for all three it actually represented a step down. They all moved from more secure, protected positions to work as a mule.

### **Contacts through the drugs market**

Sharon knew her contact through buying crack cocaine from him. He said that he could arrange for her to work as a mule and she agreed. Although mule recruiters tended to avoid employing people with drug habits (this will be explored further on), this was a viable route into trafficking, although perhaps not a particularly common one. These and the above section on drugs business contacts, suggest that there may be an overlap between drug distribution and drug selling networks.

### **Prison**

Two respondents made contacts in drug trafficking as a result of imprisonment.

Lorenzo was an independent, solo entrepreneur with many years of experience. His initial entry into international trafficking was working as a drugs mule. A friend he knew from jail called him up and invited him to join him on holiday to South America. Lorenzo contends that he was largely unaware that the trip was to work as a mule although he knew they were there for some form of business. On the last day, they made and swallowed

capsules of cocaine together and flew back to Europe. This was not presented as an offer of work; indeed I got the impression that Lorenzo was not clear what the purpose of the trip was until the last couple of days.

Frank was imprisoned for his first trip as a mule. He found himself in a desperate financial situation once again, this time far from home and with no opportunity for legal employment. At first contacts from prison paid him a wage to post small quantities of drugs. After some time they asked if he would like to make a further trip as a mule. Like Frank's first offer of mule work, the offer was presented as an informal offer of work.

### **Unwilling mules**

The majority of mules I interviewed knew that they were getting involved in trafficking and were (to a greater or lesser extent) willing. In contrast, some respondents were coerced into mule-work against their will (2) or became involved unknowingly (2).

### **Mules recruited by explicit threat**

Howard and Marina were both recruited into mule-work through explicit threat. Marina was threatened by her ex-partner who was also the father of her daughter. He kidnapped her daughter and gave Marina an ultimatum:

Before I came here, 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. (p. 97)

Marina contacted the police and social services in her home country, however since her ex-partner was a legal guardian these agencies could offer little assistance. Furthermore, the threat was credible: when Marina was pregnant with her daughter (one of two twins) he beat her badly and she lost one of the twins. He gave her only a week to decide if she was going to accept the job; there was no financial incentive, only that she would get her daughter back:

I was so confused [about what to do] because I never [did] something like that, to travel with drugs. I didn't know what to do because I am also against this, especially cocaine and all that. [Marina explained that her partner became extremely violent towards her when he had been using cocaine] but somehow my only desire was to get my baby back. So at last I said yes, because I was really worried. [...] I can expect anything from him: when he is saying he wanted to kill her, I will believe it. For real. (Marina p. 98)

Howard was coerced into working as a mule by the brother of an old colleague and friend. Howard used to work in the music business in the 1970's and 80's and toured with Latin bands in Colombia. Through this, Howard knew people on the peripheries of the drugs trade:

[They were] never involved in the violence, least as I know of it. They were always on the periphery as promoters, as showmen or whatever, you know. But the contact that exists between those recreational drugs in the music business, whether it be rock 'n' roll or Latin is very strong. It's extremely strong.' (p.272).

Twenty years later, Howard had moved away from the music business and was dealing art internationally. He was visited Latin America periodically and was initially approached with an offer of mule-work: \$8000 to traffic drugs back to North America. He was asked several times; each time he refused the wage increased. He saw getting involved with drugs as a step backwards, particularly as he had problematic drug use in the past:

I mean \$10,000, \$20,000... no. I could use the money yes, I could absolutely use the money. But what am I risking, you know. Anything and everything I re-attained. I'm not talking about material goods.'

[...]

'What did I have to gain? \$20,000? [...] Here, that's what? Two years, four years of work and you're talking about a six hour trip. To them, it's the gold, it's the ark, it's the golden pot. To me it's not, it wasn't.' (p.266/7; p.271).

After Howard refused to traffic drugs several times, his contact made an excuse to come to Quito 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 saying that if Howard didn't return with drugs, there would be 'problems'. When the drugs arrived packaged in a suitcase, his contact had a 9 mm pistol tucked into the waist 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 70s and 80s] 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.[...] To them a human life is just a piece of garbage: 'you're in my way, I'm going to take care of it; you're going to be out of my way'. So... that was my mindset. That's who I think they are. (p.272).



Both Marina and Howard were threatened by people that they knew. This echoes wider trends interpersonal violence. In both instances previous knowledge about the mule was used to create a credible threat and to attain dominance over them<sup>45</sup>.

Marina was coerced within the framework of gendered power relations. Her partner used his relational position both to Marina and her daughter as a resource to manipulate Marina into trafficking drugs for him. By taking Marina's daughter from her, he employed his reputation as both violent and ruthless as further forms of social capital. The history of the relationship provided context for the credibility of his threats. Although it would be simplistic to suggest that Marina had no choice in this situation, it is evident that she had few resources with which to take control. As she notes, she tried to use her position as mother to mobilise official sources of power into helping her get her daughter back. When this failed, Marina had no other resources to draw on except her compliance.

Both Howard and Marina complied with the threat. Interestingly, they have different understandings of the levels of choice and agency they had:

I was saying yes to carry drugs but think we must also think about why because most people are not interested in why... [...] I don't [see] myself as a criminal 'cause somehow I didn't get to choose when I wanted to see her [daughter] alive. It's difficult to explain. (Marina, p101)

I take responsibility because I said yes. No matter what. I said yes. No matter how you were threatened or how you were cajoled you said yes, so therefore it's yours. It's on your back. It's on you. (Howard, p.270)

Coercing mules into trafficking drugs appears counterintuitive to good practice: experienced mules stressed the importance of being calm and relaxed and looking like any other traveller - something a mule under threat or coercion is extremely unlikely to be able to do. This partially explains the relatively high number of coerced respondents in this sample and should not be read as representative of wider trends. Another consideration is that these threats were made by people who were drug users and that were known to have violent, unstable tendencies by the respondents.

I tentatively suggest that both Marina and Howard's contacts were involved in trafficking but had somehow got into debt (possibly through drug use or drugs being stolen). Aware of the risk, they decided to try and get someone else to carry the drugs for them. They chose someone they knew and employed existing (power) relations (in Marina's case) and

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<sup>45</sup> Using power and knowledge as a means of dominance echoes Foucault's theories of domination (Garland 1990: 137) **Garland, D.** 1990 *Punishment and modern society : a study in social theory*, Oxford: Clarendon.

knowledge (in Howard's case) to gain compliance. Indeed coercion is unimaginable without prior knowledge of the mule coerced and is probably a last resort: Howard's contact tried to persuade him to work several times before he threatened him into working.

On a final note, I found no examples of women who were forcefully recruited into drug trafficking to pay back debts as some other researchers have discovered.

### **Unknowing mules: 'set ups'**

Two female respondents (Tisha and Sara) were set up: they both had drugs placed in their suitcase by someone they knew.

The existence of unknowing mules is controversial both inside prison and in the wider world<sup>46</sup>. Many experienced mules and traffickers (both men and women) were sceptical of the existence of this practice: they claimed that the incentives offered by contacts and traffickers attract an ample quantity of willing workers thus making 'set-ups' unnecessary. Other respondents claimed that sending drugs with someone who does not know what they are doing simply makes bad business sense as the risk of losing the drugs are high.

It was commonly asserted to visitors to the women's prison that a significant proportion of inmates were unaware that they were carrying drugs. It is likely that the number of such cases were exaggerated for reasons I described in chapter 4. Nonetheless, I begin from the assumption that both women were genuinely set up. The purpose of this section is to take seriously *how* these women were set up: to ask what norms of social interaction made this possible and to explore the business logic behind such a mode of operation.

Both Sara and Tisha were set up by men they knew. Respondents' narratives focused on the relationship with the man who set them up. Sara was set up by an old family friend: she had come to Ecuador to help him organise papers for immigration to Europe (he was not from Latin America but was there in transit). Tisha was invited to Ecuador by her lover for a romantic reconciliation. Both had come to Ecuador under unremarkable pretences with no idea that their host (neither of whom was Ecuadorian) was involved in drugs in any way. Both experienced this betrayal through the lens of their gendered relationships and position:

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<sup>46</sup> In the legal setting, *mens rea* is particularly controversial in relation to drug trafficking offences (Kalunta-Crumpton 1998: 327). See also **Fortson, R.** 2002 *Misuse of drugs and drug trafficking offences*, 4th Edition, London: Sweet & Maxwell. p.2-29.

He never once asked me how would you like to do something like this, or [said] this is the type of business that I'm into. [...] Can you do this for me? That was the things he never gave me the chance to respond to. I feel like I was... *raped* of my right to say are out of your *damn mind*? What the hell is wrong with you?! You know, what kind of person are you?! (Tisha, p.133).

Both Tisha and Sara understood their participation in drug trafficking as completely passive. They made no decision to traffic drugs. Both describe themselves as being pulled into something that they had no understanding of, no control over and in which there were completely powerless. Although the metaphor of rape might seem extreme, it conveys the sense of powerlessness and gendered victimisation which underpins her experience. However, it was precisely these gendered relationships and positions of violated trust and subsequent domination that produced the conditions under which both men could plant drugs into their suitcases.

Although both were certain that they had been betrayed, neither could explain how or why. Both provided me with a detailed explanation about how the drugs had come into their possession (exchange of suitcases, false names, serious warning signs which they had ignored and so on), however, they were not positioned to have the knowledge of why or how this had taken place. Neither had any experience of working in the drug business at any level before, nor did they have any criminal record. Feelings of betrayal and confusion were bound up with a lack of understanding about drug trafficking.

I don't understand. I don't. I think... he is the Godfather of my son. When I think of it I say, did he not think of my children? Did he not think of what he meant to me? What I meant... Did I ever mean anything to him or was he just using us? You know, all times we spent together, the fun we always had. It's like, it doesn't mean anything to me anymore, it's gone, it's blank, he's hurt me, he broke me.

[...]

I just want to ask why. A big question: why me? Why not take one of your girls from to the streets? [...] I always think, if he was in the drug business, why? You know, we were always sending him money. He never had money, he never had anything, you know, he was always broke, always. Unless this was just a big game he was playing with us for years. (Sara, p.119/120).

On a final note, although Tisha and Sara knew the person who set them up for many years, it was not until legal investigations were made following their arrests that they discovered that the men who set them up had been living under a pseudonym and had lied about their past and even their nationality.

## **The business of setting up and coercing mules**

Although none of the organisers or mule recruiters admitted to ever sending drugs in this way, many had heard of someone else sending drugs this way. Nonetheless, they were helpful in discussing with me the rationale behind this mode of operation.

Ryan heard of a ploy whereby t-shirts impregnated with cocaine were sent with an unknowing mule. Although the chemical camouflage virtually eliminates the chances of the unknowing mule stealing the drugs, the unknowing mule would not know not to pack liquids near the t-shirts (in case the liquid spilled and dissolved the cocaine), or to avoid placing the t-shirts near heat sources such as radiators since cocaine can be broken down by heat (for such an example see Saabag 1999). On the large scale, another scam is to load several kilos of a drug into someone's car while on holiday (for example by identifying a British car in a France, or an American car in Mexico by their number plate). Someone then follows the vehicle through customs and to their home, robs their vehicle unpacks the drugs and dumps the car (for one such scam see Sabbag 1999 [1976]). In both cases the investment is high. Although the risk of losing the drugs might be high, the risk of arrest is extremely low. Similar scams have also been reported in the press (The Observer 2000). Nonetheless, such reports are inevitably loaded by local politics and contexts.

From an organiser's perspective such practice is useful as it eliminates personal risk of arrest since the mule has no idea who sent them. However, if one purpose of sending an unknowing mule is to cut the tie between the mule and the organiser, it is puzzling that both women were apparently set up by someone they knew (or at least were well acquainted with).

After extensive discussion about why and how this might be an effective method of transportation with professional traffickers, I tentatively suggest that there are differences between a professional 'set up' and the two cases above. Both Tisha and Sara noted that their friend (the contact) acted randomly and irrationally when they were in Ecuador. Although it is impossible to fully understand what happened in these very different cases (especially from mules' limited testimonies), I would suggest that the person 'known' to the mule (both unknowing and coerced) was not an organiser/investor, but someone who was under coercion themselves. It is possible that the middleman (boyfriend or friend) was under pressure to pay debts. Instead of working as a courier themselves (as Graham did), they coerced someone they knew or simply planted the drugs in their suitcase.

My aim here is not to provide a robust explanation of why and how people are 'set up' with drugs so much as to show that there are plausible explanations for this phenomenon.

Furthermore, to counterpoint the experiences of the willing and knowing mules, it is necessary to acknowledge that a minority work as a mule against their will or knowledge.

### **Making contacts: overview**

Much can be extrapolated from the data presented. The most immediate conclusion that can be drawn is the heterogeneity of connections between mules and contacts. Nonetheless, connections were clustered around social connections and activities (friends, family, activities in the community) and connections to drugs and crime (dealers, sellers and prison contacts). Rarely was the contact a person new to the mule's social milieu, usually they were connected to someone the mule knew well (boyfriends or friends).

Those mules who were unwillingly recruited into mule-work (through threat or coercion) were similarly connected. Similarly, since 'setting up' an unknowing mule relied on an existing relationship of trust mules knew their contacts.

Like drug traffickers at higher levels 'people appear to be recruited through a process of large networks, where typically they are known to others through means other than drug smuggling. The process underscores the informal elements of trust and word of mouth that work in most drug smuggling networks.' (Decker and Chapman 2008: 96).

*Routes into trafficking*

	Willing mules		Coerced mules		'Set up'
	women	men	women	men	all women
'Cold call' from someone just met	Mandalina Emma <sup>47</sup>				
Acquaintance		Frank			
Family of a friend	Bonny				
Friend	Donna	Graham			
Friend of the family	Amanda Angela			Howard	Sara
Friend of husband/partner/boyfriend	Anika Manuela Caroline Marta				
Romantic partner	Paula Marta Manuela Catalina		Marina		Tisha
Successful female mule	Catalina Tanya Amanda				
From selling drugs; trafficking	Donna Tanya	Graham Michael Guillermo <sup>48</sup>			
From buying drugs	Sharon				
Contact from prison		Lorenzo Frank (second trip)			

**Comparable data**

This is the first project to explore mules (and women's) recruitment into trafficking. As such there is little comparable data. Recently the Matrix Knowledge Group explored routes into the drug trade. However, 95% of respondents were male, 41% of them were imprisoned on charges of supply or intent to supply rather than import/export offences (2007:58). Nonetheless, at first glance there are some apparent similarities:

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<sup>47</sup> Emma was offered work as a mule but did not accept the offer.

<sup>48</sup> Guillermo trained as a mule but never returned to complete the work.

How became involved	No. of respondents
Friend involved in business	103
Met a new friend who got them involved	31
User	19
Family	16
Friend through ethnic ties	11
Contacts in prison	8
Other	19
Not known	19
Total	222

*How traffickers became involved in trafficking adapted from Matrix Knowledge Group (2007: 24).*

It is possible that routes into the drug trade vary at different levels of the trade as well as according to gender however there is insufficient data to allow for any meaningful comparison.

The reader should note that the categories in the Matrix Knowledge Group study (described in the table) are mutually exclusive. In contrast, this research explored the multiple ways that respondents were connected to their contacts both socially and where appropriate through shared history and understand that several respondents knew their contacts in a number of ways. Furthermore, prolonged engagement with respondents allowed me to explore the meanings of the social interactions between mule and contact and have shown that in some cases (particularly where the contact was romantically involved with the mule) the boyfriend played an important role in the mule's recruitment. Rather than just facilitating their entry into drug trafficking by providing contacts, the relationship with their boyfriend/contact was also frequently bound up with obligation and a wish for love and security. This theme will be further developed in the next chapter on motives.

### **Gender: contacts and opportunities**

Despite the comparatively small sample of this research, it is nonetheless apparent the gendered dynamic of 'social connections and everyday activities' are significant. Two particular forms of contact emerged here that were not reported by studies of male traffickers (Decker and Chapman 2008, Matrix Knowledge Group 2007); recruitment through a successful (female) mule and recruitment through a romantic partner. These suggest that the social connections and everyday activities which facilitate men's and women's entry into drug trafficking may be different.

### *Successful mules*

Only women in this research sought out contacts via successful mules (who were both women). I would suggest that seeing other *women* as successful traffickers may have had a role in making mule-work seem a viable avenue for (illegal) money earning. Notably, both Tanya and Amanda had been involved in illegal forms of money making (benefit fraud, cheque fraud and drug dealing: all stereotypically ‘feminine’ types of economic crime), as such, they may simply have been attuned to take mental note of new ways of making money. Although I have separated the mechanics of entry and motives for entry into the drug trade, opportunity and motive are intertwined. Here, mule-work was something learned about and forgotten. Once the idea had been planted though, working as a mule then re-emerged as a meaningful path of action in a time of crisis.

Male mules may also be connected to trafficking through a successful mule. One respondent who recruited mule found that once a mule made the trip successfully it was common for the mule’s friends (male or female) to come looking for work. Knowing a successful mule also has implications for assessing risk: this is examined in chapter 8.

### *Boyfriends and partners*

This finding has parallels with other kinds of crime: ‘the role of men in initiating women into crime - especially serious crime – is a consistent finding in research’ (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996: 467), particularly in regard to street crime (Pettitway 1987) and serious crime (Steffensmeier 1983).

Although partners played an important role in providing a pathway into crime for women there is little evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, of this being a route into crime for men. Since the drug trade is dominated by men (Adler 1993), it is likely that the majority of contacts are men. Nonetheless, it is interesting that women may play an important role in recruiting female mules, either as successful mules or as mule recruiters.

On a final note, the reader should not conclude that women were ‘led astray’ by bad boyfriends. The following chapters do much to flesh out this route into trafficking. Suffice to say at this point that where the offer or suggestion to traffic drugs came from a partner, opportunity and motive are inextricably linked.

### *Gender and social closeness of contacts*

Steffensmeier contends that ‘the circle of contacts of female in the underworld tends to be more intense interpersonally, but rather limited in number. By comparison, males are more likely to have many ties and to move in wider circles.’ (1983: 1012).



At first glance his hypothesis appears to be borne out here: some women were recruited into drug trafficking through social networks which were small and close: such as through romantic partners. However, women were also connected to their contacts through broader and looser social networks: for example through the drugs market (either as consumers or dealers), through work and through large social networks (such as friends of boyfriends, family, community or church). As such, it is difficult to draw any conclusion about the role of gender and the size of social networks that facilitate crime here.

### Trafficking and ethnic/kin networks: not family but friends

It has been widely assumed that trafficking is facilitated by existing networks of immigrants to the west (Decker and Chapman 2008) i.e. Colombian immigrants in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk, et al. 2003) or Jamaican mules in London (Ruggiero and South 1995). Ethnic and kin ties have been traditionally assumed to be a source of trust; significant in a business where there exists no legal way to ensure that deals are kept (Dorn, et al. 2005; Hobbs and Pearson 2001; Pearson and Hobbs 2003)<sup>49</sup>.

Here I explore the role of ethnic/kin networks in recruiting mules into mule-work. The general picture is one of difference rather than similarity:

Mule	Contact	Contact's ethnicity	Mule's ethnicity
Amanda	Friend's partner (successful mule)	Colombian	Latin (not Colombian)
Anika	Husband's friend	Nigerian	White, European
Manuela	Boyfriend	African	White, European
Caroline	Boyfriend's friends	Colombian	White, North American
Paula	Boyfriend's friends	White, European	White, European
Marina	Boyfriend and his friends	African	White, European
Bonny	Friend	Colombian	White, North-American
Marta	Boyfriend	African	White, African
Sharon	Dealer	Nigerian	White, African
Sara (set up)	Family friend	Black, African	White, European
Tisha (set up)	Boyfriend	Colombian	Black, North-American
Tanya	Successful mule	Not stated	White European

*Ethnicity of respondents and their contacts*

<sup>49</sup> It has also been contended that drug trafficking is *not* organised along ethnic/kin groups: 'One of the potentially most interesting conclusions to be drawn from the data is the degree to which the organized crime groups in the sample have no strong social or ethnic identity [...] it is possible to assert with some degree of certainty that in the majority of cases [surveyed/reported in the survey] criminal groups are not tied together by ethnic linkages' (p 26). **United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention** 2002 'Towards a monitoring system for transnational organized crime trends: results of a pilot survey of 40 selected organized criminal groups in 16 countries. (unpublished)', Vienna: United Nations. Cited by Dorn et al. (2005: 13).

The majority of contacts were 'foreign' to the country in which mules resided: often being either Latin or African immigrants into Europe or North America. Conversely, respondents were almost all from a different ethnic group than their contacts. From this data it appears that mules were not recruited from the same ethnic/kin groups as their contacts.

This may be indicative of wider trends. Although the drugs industry is extremely large and subject to considerable variation, the extent to which ethnic/kin networks facilitate drug trafficking is subject to much debate. Putting this debate aside, it is nonetheless a significant finding that women were recruited outside of ethnic/kin networks rather than from within them.

Although it is difficult to conclude exactly why, some hypotheses have emerged. Donna – the only female mule recruiter I interviewed said that she would never recruit anyone that she knew well because she would feel guilty if they got caught. She chose to recruit 'street people': people that she knew of but who that did not know her well. This would suggest that some mules are not part of the contacts social networks but exist as a sort of satellite to them (in some cases at least).

None of the men cited the nationality of their contact or attributed the significance to it. As such this data have not been included.

Although other research has emphasised the shared ethnic backgrounds of mules and their contacts (for example Jamaican mules pressured into traffic by Jamaican Yardies (Sudbury 2005)), the picture that this research has produced is very different. This may be in part since the group of respondents is from all over the world. Nonetheless, even allowing for this group of respondents being atypical, it is still important to note that mules are connected to trafficking in a variety of ways but that shared ethnicity may not be that salient compared to other social networks.

### **Globalisation and population flows**

Several mules were recruited into mule-work while they were visiting Ecuador on legitimate, international activities such as a school exchange, business and learning Spanish. Others were recruited in their 'home country' by people they came across in everyday activities and relationships. These kind of international connections are impossible to imagine fifty years ago. Thus, these kinds of connections are a reminder that drug trafficking takes place in the context of international population flows. Although drug trafficking has often been presented as an 'alien invasion' (see chapter 1), the picture presented here is one

which is much more complex reflecting the criss-crossing nature of international flows of people.

### **Are people targeted for mule work? The mules perspective**

It is persistently claimed that mules are targeted by traffickers who exploit their poverty and naivety to recruit them into mule-work. Most recently, the BBC reported on a Trinidadian drugs mule who was befriended by a local loan shark who then forced her to work as a mule to repay her debt (Jeavans 2005). Such accounts place mules as victims of both poverty and the ruthless traffickers who seek to exploit them. More recently, press accounts have contended that young women are 'groomed' by traffickers to become mules (Francis 2008; Ward 2008).

This kind of targeting was not a feature of the mules I interviewed. Although mules did not consider themselves to have been targeted due to some vulnerability (even those mules who were coerced), some mules did think that their contact had approached them for some specific aspect which made them a 'good mule'.

Frank claims that: 'he knew I was skint n I spoke Spanish'. Frank presents himself as an ideal choice for his contact: he is both needy (he was unable to work due to illness) and spoke Spanish (a useful skill for international work of this kind).

Howard thought that he was targeted for his ability to pass through customs unnoticed:

To them I was Mr ideal. Why was I Mr ideal? Because at this point I'm in the 3<sup>rd</sup> age of my life, I'm semi-sophisticated and I can walk around with enough stamps in my passport to say this guy travels all the time, not only to Ecuador but to every other country in Latin America. [...] Nobody questions me when I get to the border. (Howard, p.266).

Although Frank and Howard were targeted by their contacts for skills or for other aspects that might make them less likely to be detected, their age may also be significant. One experienced mule, Jensen, commented that he knew of several older people who worked as a mule regularly a couple of times a year to supplement their government pension. He contended that customs were less likely to suspect a pensioner of carrying drugs. Notably though, all three men were over fifty and did not fit the stereotypical profile of a mule but they were all arrested nonetheless.

Steffensmeier contends that women may be recruited into drug trafficking because they are less likely to get arrested (1983). Indeed, some mules were told this by their

recruiters. However it was not being female alone that was important, rather the intersection of nationality, experience and skin colour:

‘They said I was 18, I had an innocent face, I knew the procedure [at immigration] that I was [North American].’ (Caroline 2003: 9)

Indeed, some mules who participated in this research may have been approached precisely because they did not fit the typical picture of a poor, deprived and naïve mule from the third world. This hypothesis is buttressed by reports from some respondents who recruited mules.

### **The mule-recruiter’s perspective: trust, knowledge and control**

I interviewed several mule recruiters about who they would chose to recruit as mules. There were a number of qualities that they looked for. Ryan said that it was important that he was looking for people who were ‘more normal than normal’ (p. 283); people who could fit in at the airport and were unlikely to draw the attention of customs and excise. They had to look presentable which precluded people who had serious drug habits. Ryan (who recruited several westerners) also like to recruit 'backpacker' types as he was exporting drugs in sports equipment. Some mules and recruiters mentioned that recruiting older people was ideal as they were the least likely to be suspected.

However, although there was an 'ideal' mule (one who was unlikely to be detected and in addition had calm nerves and would not panic) Ryan also looked for someone with connections:

I look for someone that needs cash. Someone you can trust, you know, responsible. I would actively go out ‘n look for a mule among people I know. Usually once you find once their friends see ‘n put themselves forward. Someone you can trust or frighten into not stealing. Or at least have some control or power over them, maybe know their family.’ (Ryan, p.22)

Recruiting people who were in some way connected is one way to ensure trust in a mule and a form of insurance against them absconding with either the drugs or the money. A fine balance had to be struck here: someone who could be tracked down if they tried to abscond, but at the same time not someone who knew the recruiter well.

Some organisers minimised this risk by recruiting through a specialised mule recruiter. Interestingly, although Donna recruited mules herself, she sometimes recruited

through a third person to reduce the risk to herself. Although she would meet the person to explain everything, usually the mule would only know her by a false name

Notably, none mentioned that they would look exclusively for a woman. Indeed, many male mule-recruiters hinted that they would rather not deal with women since if they had children they were more likely to ‘snitch’ if they thought it would get them out of jail. Donna, the only female mule recruiter I interviewed seemed less bothered about recruiting female mules, although she did not want to recruit anyone she knew since she would feel ‘guilty’ if they go caught.

Zaitch concludes that mules are recruited from an increasingly diverse pool of people. Although historically there was a point when women *were* less likely to be suspected, that time had now passed. He contends that there was an important shift after 1991: ‘Increasing global drug enforcement efforts pushed cocaine exporters to use less vulnerable couriers, more men, younger or older people, better off individuals with steady jobs, frequent flyers and more Colombians living abroad’ (Zaitch 2002: 146).

Although gender was part of the picture of recruitment, other concerns were more important: for example if the mule was connected and could therefore be considered reliable (and could be trusted not to abscond with drugs, money or information to the police). Lastly, a mule's ability to pass through customs was dependent on a variety of factors: not only gender but also age, experience, nationality and so on.

### **Conclusion: Recruitment into trafficking; victims or volunteers?**

There was considerable diversity in how mules get involved: boyfriends, friends, acquaintances, chance encounters with successful mules and dealers all provided women and men with a contact to drug trafficking and ultimately into mule work. Furthermore, personal contacts are absolutely fundamental to an individual's entrance into the drug business. Although on rare occasions individuals may be subject to a ‘cold call’ on the whole, men and women became involved in trafficking because of who they knew, not what they knew: personal contacts were more important than having particular skills or even being particularly ‘vulnerable’ to purposive recruitment by those already working in the business. Data from recruiters showed that being ‘known’ was a more sought after capital than being desperate, indebted or poor.

This list is not exhaustive: mules may be recruited in a variety of ways which have not been covered here. Data here is from a small sample of imprisoned mules. It may also be

that the conditions of mules who are not arrested are significantly different although I cannot think of any plausible reason why that might be.

Although it is beyond the scope of this research to catalogue the differences between how men and women are recruited, it is clear that gender plays an important role in shaping pathways into trafficking. Importantly though, there were many similarities in the experiences of male and female mules. Both men and women were forcefully recruited through coercion and blackmail, although these took gendered forms and relied on gendered resources to facilitate them.

In chapters 2 and 3, I described the emancipation thesis: that as women's opportunities to commit crime become more like their male contemporaries they will commit the same kinds of crime. Although this could tentatively be true in some limited cases (for example Donna ended up working as a mule through her contacts working as a drug dealer, much like Graham), many women were recruited from people that they knew, met and saw most regularly in traditionally 'feminine' settings: relationships, visiting family friends, or friends of boyfriends.

Next, although this research initially focussed on the role of *gender* as the most significant structure in women's lives, other social structures also emerged through data collection: age, generation and employment status. These social structures will emerge as important also in the next chapter which examines women's motives to become involved in drug trafficking.

Lastly, to return to the question set at the beginning of this chapter though of whether are women victims or volunteers. In this chapter I have shown that some women (and men) could justifiably be described as victims. They were coerced into something that they did not consent to (either by force, or because they were not aware they were carrying drugs). Conversely, some women actively sought out the opportunity to work as a mule: no one forced, or bullied them; they explicitly described their involvement as a result of their own volition. Between these two poles though, many women were neither victims, nor did they seek out mule-work on their own. Many women were asked to traffic drugs by someone that they knew. Although they were not coerced, the offer was bound up in social relationships of obligation. Even at this early stage of getting involved in mule-work, a complex picture is beginning to emerge: one in which women mules are neither 'victims' nor 'bad asses' in any straightforward way. This picture becomes further complicated when mules' motives are taken into account. This will be examined in the next section.

The data I have presented in this chapter is important in filling a significant gap about what is known about how women become involved in drug trafficking. Importantly it

lays the groundwork for the following chapters: understanding *how* women are recruited is important for understanding women's motives for becoming involved in drug trafficking (which will be examined in the next chapter) and also how they make the decision to accept or seek out mule work (which is examined in the chapter after that). The connections made at this stage will also shape their experiences of working as a mule, which will be examined in the second substantive section on mule-work.

## CHAPTER 7: MOTIVES FOR WORKING AS A MULE: OBLIGATION, CHOICE, MONEY AND LOVE

### Introduction: contemporary research

This chapter examines the motives that mules gave for either seeking or accepting an offer of mule-work. Understanding mules' motives for getting involved in drug trafficking is important to address the question of whether women become drug mules as a result of victimisation or through their own volition.

The importance of financial and economic concerns has been borne out by empirical qualitative research. Financial concerns dominated mules motives in Dorado's research on Colombian mules imprisoned in Europe. The largely related to women's role as the head of the household: 'payment for medical treatment for a member of the family, overdue rent, debts, unemployment and responsibility for children (2005: 316, my translation). This has been echoed in qualitative research with male and female mules imprisoned in the UK: '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 [of drugs mules from the 3<sup>rd</sup> world]' (Green 1998: 18).

In sum, the 'feminisation of poverty' has been seen to 'compel' women into trafficking drugs in order to 'survive' (Sudbury 2005). Against a background of grinding deprivation 'the temptation to earn £1000 often proved irresistible' (Heaven 1996: 162 see also Dorn et al. 1992: 189). Although presenting mules as victims of global inequalities is politically potent, it has allowed little space in which to 'see' women's own agency and decision making.

Before presenting my findings, an important caveat must be made: the mules who participated in the current research are a distinct demographic group to those who have been the subjects of previous research projects. As can be seen in Appendix 1, research on drug mules has traditionally focussed on mules from Jamaica, Nigeria and Colombia. Not all respondents here described their lives before trafficking in terms of deprivation or debt: some were employed in legal jobs; others were from developed (rather than developing) nations. Some were from the developed world; others from diverse regions including Africa and East Asia.

Green included mules from 'first world' backgrounds in her research (1998). In *The Scapegoat Strategy* she describes and analyses mules from developing and developed worlds as two separate groups (although she makes no distinction between genders). She concludes that poverty played a central role in motivating mules from the third world and that British



couriers were motivated by similar concerns: debt, economic distress and (in the 6 cases of young female couriers which she presents) ‘external pressure’ from older, more powerful men (1998: 3). In addition though, she reports 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’ (1998: 92). In other words, they were motivated not by economic survival but by betterment.

To briefly recap what was stated in chapters 2 and 3: previous research has been underpinned by a static and dualistic concept of gender. This chapter will therefore explore the role of ‘gender’ as a social structure (Connell 1986), but also as identity. Furthermore, I will explore the intersectionalities between gender and other social structures such as class, ethnicity, nationality, age, generation and so on although it is difficult to represent these fully without identifying individuals. Nonetheless, these have been included in a limited way where possible.

### **Motives for involvement**

Aside from mules that were coerced, most had a main purpose in mind when they accepted the offer of mule work:

- Redecorate the house
- Move to a bigger house to have room for children
- Pay off debts
- Fund a drug habit
- Maintain or attain a better quality of life
- Financial independence
- Get married
- Take care of family without relying on anyone else
- Start a new business
- Quit prostitution
- To provide the resources to settle down and start a family
- Pay for an operation for a relative
- Have a better future for children
- Buy land

Even within this relatively small group of 20 mules (14 female, 6 male, including 4 experienced female mules) there is considerable variety of motives. This reflects the wide variety of national and historical contexts which (although crucial) cannot be fully reflected here for reasons of confidentiality. Nonetheless, respondents’ motives fall into two broad categories: motives connected to economic concerns and motives connected to love.

## **Economic motives**

### **Financial crisis: debts and emergencies**

Amanda and Mandalina both accepted mule-work as a strategy to solve an economic crisis: Amanda to pay back debts; Mandalina to pay for an operation for her grandmother.

Amanda had a stable job in the financial industry; she had four children and a partner she occasionally called her husband. Amanda lost her job in the economic crisis that hit New York following the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001<sup>50</sup>. At the same time the relationship with her partner became abusive. She moved in with her mother temporarily to give her partner time to leave their apartment. He left her with utility bills and back rent of several thousand dollars<sup>51</sup> in her name.

Despite the complex context, Amanda's initial explanation was straightforward, highlighting financial crisis and desperation:

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 (p.66).

As the mother, Amanda had the responsibility for finding a solution to their financial problems and homelessness facing not only her immediate family but also her mother. By the time Amanda decided to seek out work as a mule, she had already been to court. Although she had been 'hustling' the benefits system to put food on the table, she saw little alternative to working as a mule. This is partly because the amounts of money to be gained are so large in comparison what most mules had the capacity to gain (not only legally but also illegally).

Mandalina was working in a bar when a customer offered her the chance to work as a mule. When she heard that her Grandmother (who had raised her) was sick, she accepted an offer of mule-work to pay for the operation her grandmother needed. At the same time though, the amount she would have received would have been also allowed her to return to the village to live with her family again. She was originally from a small village in South East Asia and said she had 'grown tired' of life in the city.

Although paying for the operation for her Grandmother was an important motive, in the short space of the interview, she offered a variety of intertwined motives. She talked

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<sup>50</sup> Amanda gave me her permission to include this detail.

<sup>51</sup> I have decided to use dollars not pounds in my thesis as it is the national currency of Ecuador and international trade (including trafficking).

about how in a few years of living in the city, she had become involved in and later given up smoking amphetamines. She had also been through a disastrous relationship with a man who left her broke taking the money he had promised to pay her for minding mules. Most painfully she described how she had to have an abortion. When she accepted the offer of mule-work she was working long hours in a bar to make ends meet. All these combined made her long for the small village which she grew up in. She also wanted to 'do right' to make up for the years that she had been away from her family.

### **Material betterment**

Some mules were motivated by economic betterment not directly related to debts or crisis. Working as a mule was a way to better their lives in ways that were otherwise unattainable. Frank was sick and unable to work. He was living meagrely on a government welfare program. Working as a mule would allow him to materially improve his living conditions:

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 p.276)

Like Green's third world cohort, Frank's position prior to mule-work could classify as: 'general economic hardship which showed no signs of improving.' (1991: 23). Although he was not living in conditions of 'grinding poverty' as Green describes of the Nigerian mules that she interviewed, he was nonetheless living meagrely on his state allowance. In this context, working as a mule was a way to fulfil otherwise unattainable goals (this echoes Merton's theory of strain (1968)).

Although some mules got involved with a specific intention, others had a generalised wish for greater material resources which they thought would elevate their quality of life.

Michael (a student in his early twenties) had been involved in overland drug trafficking within and across borders in Europe. He first got involved in the drugs market through the party scene at his University. He 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. Influenced in part by the influx of young tourists, bringing western culture and ideals with them, Michael was in his early twenties and when I first met him he had hair down to his shoulders and dressed like an American skateboarder and frequently finished his sentences with 'man'. He enjoyed an

active social life, travelling and partying. He also wanted to maintain his independence from his parents. Michael planned to make several trips.

Similarly, Tanya (also European) planned to work as a mule as a long term strategy to make money. The circumstances which led to her seeking mule-work hint at the pressures in her life at that time. Tanya's career in the drugs market began selling drugs in a club. Then she fell pregnant. The birth of her baby radically changed her life:

I didn't like how it changed. Like before I was always in the street, only going to my house just to sleep. [...] I never used drugs before my child but I was always around people, never on my own. Every 4 hours I had to give her food I was changed totally and I don't like this. I will not get a child again for sure. It's too much changing for my life. [...] On one side I wanted to be with her, on the other side I saw it's not good. But everybody was hoping about it, that I could make a choice to say it's not good for my child to be like this, I have to do something and she cannot live with me.' (2003, p.2)

Eventually, Tanya put her baby in her mother's care. After this she contacted a successful mule and planned to make her first trip as a mule. General material betterment was underpinned by her recent experience of what she perceived as 'failed' motherhood. She planned to use the money she would make working as a mule to support her mother and daughter materially.

Since both Michael and Tanya had worked in the drugs market before, working in international drug trafficking was an extension of an existing way of life and existing identity. Michael and Tanya's experience demonstrate clearly that mules may be motivated by economic concerns - not be simply in response to poverty and lack of opportunity but also out of ambition for a better quality of life.

### **'More money to smoke'**

Sharon accepted an offer of mule-work to have 'more money to smoke [crack]' and to 'treat' her daughter (she described her motives in this order of priority). She had a legal job at the time which she relied upon to support her mother and her daughter. However she relied on a variety of strategies to support her habit:

[It's] funny because some drug addicts you see they'll steal to get money to smoke [crack] they turn to prostitution to smoke and stuff like that but not me, never. I never stole one penny from anybody to support my habit no, with me it was just like that, if I didn't have money I just didn't smoke, y'know. But selling things for smoking, now that I've done a lot... [prompt] I once went to this pawnshop and pawned my TV, my microwave and everything just to support my habit. It was bad,

but steal from anybody? Never. I just don't have the heart for it. I just don't have the heart for it... (2003, p.15).

Sharon emphasised that she did 'not have the heart' to do other types of crime.

Unlike Tanya above she identifies as non-criminal. However, since she was already a drug user, she did not necessarily see any moral problem with importing a drug which she herself was using. Having money to smoke would have meant a respite from the month to month work of providing for her family and supporting her habit. Although having money to smoke was important, in her own account crack did not cause her to commit crime. Waldorf et al. researched the relationship between crack and crime:

The criminal behaviours so often attributed to one drug or another are not in any direct, mechanistic sense 'caused' by the pharmacology of those substances. [...]. While freebasing seemed to push people to break norms and even laws on occasion, it always did so within norms and bounds that were set by socialisation, by subculture and by the self. Crack may 'cause' crime and other unwanted behaviours but its power to do so does not operate in a vacuum. (1991: 138/9).

Sharon 'engaged in forms of criminal behaviour that [...] seemed conceivable and available' (1991: 137).

### **Material betterment for others: 'provisioning'**

Adam Smith used the term 'provisioning' to refer to 'the creation and distribution of the necessities and conveniences of life' (Ferber and Nelson 1993). This term has been adopted by feminist economists Ferber and Nelson who use it to refer to 'having the basic goods and services consistent with a society's social norms' (Strober 2003: 148). Davies used the term usefully in reference to women's economic offending (2005) to describe how women provided a variety of 'necessities' for those close to them (family and romantic partners) (Davies 2005: 1999).

Several women mules cited 'provisioning' for their family as the most important motivation, either in response to a pending crisis such as debts (described above) or as a generalised wish for their family to have better.

Anika wanted to provide better housing for her 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, 2003, p.17).

Anika's role as a mother provided her with a meaning and an impetus to provide for her family. Furthermore, her European context guides the norms of provisioning: that her daughter should have her own room. Successful provisioning is deeply intertwined with her assumed identity as mother. This is echoed in Marta's account:

JF: So, what did having the money mean to you?

[pauses to think] Control and independence. Being able to say... like I would go to the shops with my daughter and she'd see something she liked. One day she saw a comforter – one with moons and stars which she always liked and it was [expensive]. I didn't have the money. I couldn't say at the end of the month we can get it, or in a few days so I ignored it, just said come on lets go. The next time she told my friend about it when we passed by the shop and he said that he'd buy it for her. And I felt like oh my god, where's my life got to? I felt like a worthless mother actually. I felt like I couldn't provide for her.

JF: It's expensive being a mother, eh?

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. Everything in one. (Marta, 217)

Marta's account speaks of motherhood as a multiple identity in which provisioning plays an important role in her self esteem and identity. Furthermore, although she wanted to be able to provide for her daughter materially, she wanted to be able to do so on her own terms which she defines as independence and control.

Angela was an experienced mule. She was offered mule-work by a friend of her husband's who she also knew from Church. She accepted mule work primarily motivated by a will to provide for her children, specifically to be able to give them better opportunities that she had:

For me, I'm not educated so like my dream was always that my children must be better than me, but I think I made a big mistake. But for me the most [important] thing was my children because I've got 4 babies.'

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.' (2003: p. 19)

Lastly, working as a mule enabled Angela to 'provision' for her children in ways that were otherwise unavailable to her. Her first trip enabled her to achieve what she had

planned: she bought a plot of land and sent her children to a good school. Other mules who successfully completed a trip were able to achieve a number of aims with the money they earned working as a mule: they paid off debts, bought gifts for family and enjoyed living easily for a while. Thus, there may be women who work successfully as a mule once and do not appear in this study (or any others). At least one professional trafficker repeatedly told me: 'most mules don't get caught'.

These three different accounts show the different meanings of 'provisioning' 'consistent with a society's social norms' (Strober 2003: 148). Provisioning is underpinned by the idea of connected decision making (Davies 2005): providing for the whole social unit (usually the family). The term provisioning may be useful in making a distinction between explanations based on 'the feminisation of poverty' which has been used in previous research on drug mules to implicitly refer to the third world experience and 'provisioning' which is premised on local social standards. Furthermore, it also highlights a broader range of provisioning activities than simple 'survival'. On a final note, respondents usually aspired to a standard of living that was defined by what their neighbours had, rather than what they knew people in other countries had.

### **Connected motives**

Women's motives were often centred around their family. Interestingly, men also engaged in 'connected motives': for the benefit of themselves and those surrounding them. As I described in the last chapter, Graham was offered work as a mule to pay back a debt incurred through working in drug trafficking which was largely his brother's fault:

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.

JF: Did you have any other options to pay the debt?

Yeah money, but there was no cash. I was working but I'd just paid off my debts so the cash was already spent. I would have had to wait for the next pay cheque and sell something from my house. I was not the kind of person who buys stuff thinking I'm gonna sell it. Once I buy something, that's it. It's mine till it's broken then I'll throw it out! It wasn't an option.' (p.191).

Graham was just 20 when he went to Ecuador to be a drugs mule. His solution to their (collective) problem prioritised his current lifestyle and identity, the best outcome for

his whole family and lastly his hopes for his future. His sense of self and pride in what he had achieved (paying off his debts and buying things for his house) tells of the importance of his identity as a self-made man. However, he also speaks of responsibility to his family. In later conversations he told me that in addition to settling the debt, he would also have made a small amount of cash which he wanted to use as an investment to start his own nightclub. The trip as a mule was not only solving the immediate problem of how to pay back his debts, but it also meant that he could fulfil his (gendered) responsibilities and desires for the future: his account is underpinned by a gendered 'duty' that is relational: as uncle, brother in law and brother.

### **Provisioning as motive and justification**

Interview data inevitably elicits post-hoc accounts of mule-work. As such motives (as stated by respondents in prison) are inevitably bound up with moral justifications and repair work (Goffman 1968).

Talking about motherhood was an important way to create a legitimate *self* in prison; this was equally true in the context of an interview. It is somewhat inevitable that respondents will (to a greater or lesser extent) narrate their motives in ways that seek to vindicate themselves. Highlighting one's role and responsibility as mother was a way to root their explanation in normative discourses of gender. Furthermore, in drawing attention to the 'push' of duty, the speaker can draw attention away from their criminal agency. Undergirding this kind of narrative is a defence against the unspoken (and unspeakable) judgement that women in prison have failed: whilst in prison they cannot provide for their children in a full way materially, physically or emotionally. This particular pain of imprisonment was strongly felt by many women (and indeed men).

As much as narratives produced in the interview were carefully crafted, they are not without a material basis. Many women in prison were single mothers and were the sole material provider for their children. This responsibility was strongly felt and is evident in the interview data: Marta's description of not being able to provide for her daughter recalls vividly her feelings of inadequacy at the time. Thus, although motives were also crafted in the prison environment, they are also 'made' in response to and within real world social structures. West and Zimmerman contend that gender is always 'done' with an intended audience in mind (1987). As such, motives also represent the social structural conditions (as both constricting and enabling) in which women decided to work as mules.



## Financial aspects of motive: discussion

Economic and financial concerns were an important motivation for men and women. In the section I will examine how much mules expected to get paid and the relationship between female gender and economic motivation.

Previous accounts of mule-work have hinged on the incredibly high wages offered to drug mules that make resisting participation difficult (Heaven 1996). This research found that there was considerable variation in what mules received. As quantities and method of concealment varied, so did the amount that mules were offered.

Role	Gender	Drug <sup>52</sup>	Method of concealment	Weight <sup>53</sup> (kilos)	Wage per trip (US\$)	Route of travel
Organiser	M	Cocaine	Chemical camouflage	3	\$15,000	Ecuador to Europe
Mule	F	Cocaine [heroin]	Luggage	'grams' [6]	\$9,000	Ecuador to North America
Mule	M	Cocaine [and heroin]	Luggage	2 [5 in total]	\$20,000	Ecuador to North America
Mule	F	Cocaine	Luggage	Unknown	'50%'	Ecuador to Western Europe
Mule	M	Cocaine	Capsules	1	\$6,000	Colombia to Ecuador
Mule	M	Cocaine	Luggage	2	\$20,000	Ecuador to Western Europe
Mule	F	Cocaine	Capsules	1.5	'enough to buy a house'	Ecuador to Southeast Asia
Mule	F	Cocaine	Underwear	1 kilo	\$500 and ½ kilo cocaine	Ecuador to Africa
Mule	M	Cocaine	Capsules	1 kilo	% cocaine trafficked	South America to Europe
Mule	F	Cocaine	Luggage	6.3	\$5,000	Ecuador to North America

*Amount mules expected to gain from mule-work<sup>54</sup>.*

The findings of this study expand considerably on the existing evidence:

<sup>52</sup> 3 mules were offered a deal for trafficking cocaine: 2 were instead carrying heroin, another was carrying cocaine and heroin. Brackets indicate what was actually carried.

<sup>53</sup> Since mules in this sample were arrested, they were told the weight of drugs they had been carrying by customs. In some instances this was radically larger than what their contact had told them it would be. However, some mules were carrying exactly the amount they had been told. The figure in brackets is what they were actually carrying.

<sup>54</sup> Data is missing from a number of respondents for several reasons. Data from 2003 mule respondents is missing as this kind of information was not sought out at that stage. One mule did not know how much she would earn: she left the money matters to her boyfriend.

Study	Amount mules expected to receive
Sudbury (2002: 69)	'A few thousand pounds.'
Green (1998: 86)	'between £300 and £1000'.
Green (1991: 39)	An average of £1,100 (£2000 the highest, £300 the lowest).
Zaitch (2002: 145)	'The broad range of backgrounds and motivations of <i>mulas</i> is further evidenced in their payment, which can fluctuate, according also to the amount transported, between \$1,500 and \$10,000.'

*Amount mules expected to receive from mule work, review of the literature.*

Some mules were offered amounts that were potentially life changing: 'enough to buy a house' is an amount that is meaningfully large in most contexts. Although the payment that mules were offered is small in comparison to the potential wholesale value once the drug reached its destination, their payment was usually larger than the wholesale value of the drugs in Ecuador<sup>55</sup>.

Mules were paid more or less on the basis of a variety of conditions. Geographical context was important: the least well-paid mule was offered just \$6,000 to cross the Colombian/Ecuadorian border; the best-paid mules were paid \$20,000 to carry 2 kilos to North America and Western Europe respectively. One trafficker who recruited mules said that he would offer a mule more to travel to the UK rather than Spain since the UK was thought to be more dangerous and he compensated accordingly. Interestingly, mules in this research were generally offered a significant amount more than has been reported elsewhere. This could be due to a number of participants from developed countries. The organiser also said that he would be more likely to pay someone that he knew better. Nonetheless there was little room for negotiation: it was unheard of for mules to dictate or even negotiate their wage.

Although amounts varied, most mules expected to receive an amount that the majority of the population are unlikely to ever receive at once. Nonetheless, the meaning of these amounts varies across continents and economies: although \$10,000 could buy a house in some countries, in others it's probably about enough to redecorate a flat. For many mules the large amount they expected to receive *did* play an important role in making their decision to work as a mule. Nonetheless, the amount that many mules were offered was not so large as to be 'irresistible'. Howard stated: 'to them it's the gold, it's the ark, it's the golden pot, to me it's not, it wasn't'. (p. 271). Furthermore, not all respondents expected to gain financially but committed to trafficking for gains that are not easily represented in figures. In short, to

<sup>55</sup> Traffickers in prison agreed that the wholesale price for cocaine at this time was about \$2,000 a kilo.

understand what motivates men and women to accept mule-work, it may be necessary to look beyond economic aspects.

### **Summary: poverty, 'provisioning' and material betterment**

Economic concerns were an important aspect of motive however economic motives were diverse and were not solely about surviving poverty. Prior qualitative studies on mules have focussed on mules from a specific national group such as Nigerians (Green 1991), Jamaicans (Sudbury 2005) or Colombians (Dorado2005). This has allowed for an analysis of socio-economic conditions in a particular region such as the particular situations of the Ibo in Nigeria (Green 1991) or women mules in Jamaica (Sudbury 2005). Due to the geographical diversity of respondents in this research it has been necessary to treat the 'financial' with a more critical perspective. Thus, this research has had to take a complex view of 'poverty' and its localised and specific meanings. Rather than 'the feminisation of poverty' thesis, this research found evidence of 'provisioning' whereby mules were motivated to trafficking as a way to provide for themselves, their families and those around them according to local standards of living.

Although some mules did offend in response to long term deprivation which showed no signs of change many saw it as a way to increase their material circumstances. Prior research on drug mules has analysed mules from the developed and undeveloped world separately. This has tended to overemphasise the importance of coming from either a 'rich' or a 'poor' country with disregard to localised layers of deprivation (which may be gendered, raced and so on). This research found that some mules from the developed world described backgrounds of deprivation, but not all did. Importantly though, although poverty was an important factor in the context in which mules decided to get involved in trafficking, many described their motive in terms of a wish for better, particularly for their family, those close to them and themselves. Indeed, obligation was more strongly felt in response to others, rather than in response to their background of deprivation.

I therefore agree with Davies that studies of crime-for-profit 'underestimate or ignore other social influences and rewards, whether these are features intrinsic to illegal work that pull people into crime or other features that propel individuals or push marginalised groups into crime.' (2005: 63).

In sum, this research has found a much wider range of 'economies' at play than simply the economic-as-money. Relational concerns were also important, not only for women but for men also. As such, there were some commonalities of motivation between

men and women. Lastly, motivations were grounded in local meanings and were formed in response to local contexts, structures and hierarchies. Although drug trafficking might be global, motives belonged to a local context.

### **Romantic love: partners, trafficking and motives**

Romantic love was cited by mules as an important motive by 4 female mules (3 first time mules (Manuela, Marta, Paula) and one experienced mule (Catalina<sup>56</sup>)). In all instances romantic partners proposed that respondents work as a mule. As such the offer and motive were deeply intertwined. These cases will now be examined in turn: each tell different stories of love and what it meant to them.

Manuela and Marta were both asked to make a single trip as a mule by their boyfriends to raise the resources to start a new future together.

Marta met her boyfriend while she was being deported to her country of birth. In the last chapter she described the subtle pressure that underpinned the offer of working as a mule from her boyfriend. In addition to this pressure, she also saw that working as a mule held potential benefits for her: she hoped to start a small (legitimate) business with her boyfriend so that he could move away from crime and they could plan a life together:

I said alright, after this you're gonna stop [trafficking]. But you can also change your life. It was a way to change my life and I thought I had someone who loved me.

JF: So, the money represented a way to change your life, but also his too?

Yeah. It was stupid, but yeah. (Marta, p.219).

Marta was also motivated by a number of other benefits. She hoped to lease a home of her own and to be able to provide for her daughter 'off her own back' rather than relying on her partner. In short, the perceived benefits from working as a mule were multiple. They included benefit for herself and boyfriend as a couple but also for herself.

In the previous section I described some of Manuela's story. She worked as a prostitute before she met her boyfriend. He became jealous about her working as a prostitute. He suggested that she work as a mule so that she could give up being a prostitute and they

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<sup>56</sup> Catalina's story is complex and worthy of a deeper analysis than can be afforded here. Although her story is not part of this chapter, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that professional mules and first time mules were both recruited by partners and that love relationships may also be the basis for longer term crime partnerships. Mandalina (another professional who worked as a mule-watcher rather than a mule) was involved in business with her boyfriend for many years. This is an avenue for further research.

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 p. 232/240).

Although demonstrating love and commitment to her boyfriend were an important motive, 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: 'many fear – quite rightly – that they will slide into poverty and/or endure social stigma' (Fraser 2005: 16). In contrast to the material realities of stigma and poverty which she had already experienced in an irregular and stigmatised 'job' as a prostitute, attaining a normal family and upholding the normal tenets of femininity were a way to symbolically and materially improve her social status (Richie 1996: 135) and long term prospects. Skeggs highlights the value of 'respectability': 'to not be respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy. [...] Respectability embodies moral authority: those who are respectable have it, those who are not, do not.' (Skeggs 1997: 3).

Lastly, Paula also got into trafficking through her boyfriend. He had bought her ticket to Ecuador so that she could learn Spanish. While she was in Ecuador she found out that he was in trouble and owed some 'people' a large debt. Shortly before she was due to return home (to Europe) her boyfriend told her that his life was being threatened. He suggested that she could carry something back for him to solve the problem. She hastily agreed:

I saw it and it was too dangerous for me but it was the only possible solution to take my boyfriend at that time out of the danger because they had him; they were threatening his life; there was no way he could do it because they didn't trust him to let him do it, he might run away or something so I felt like there is no way I could get that much money, he owed a lot of money.

So... I was just like what's more important? I'm just going to do it. Kind of like a lesser evil. It wasn't like I pondered it for a couple of days and decided what is it I should do. No, I just... It was an impulse but it wasn't forced on me. It wasn't like I was just manipulated... Well in a sense yeah but... I still knew that eventually I was the one saying I'm gonna do it, you know. (Paula p.299).

Working as a mule was a quick way to solve her boyfriend's problem. Even though she saw that trafficking drugs was dangerous, losing someone that she cared about and who

was an important part of her life and future was an immediate and very serious consideration: they had discussed getting married after she graduated from University.

I interviewed Paula at several times during her imprisonment and parole. Initially in 2003 when she had just been sentenced, she had been in prison for just over a year and was wearing an engagement ring her boyfriend had sent her. I interviewed her again in 2005/6 when she was in prison but had split up with him and finally in 2007 outside of prison (the interview above). In our last interview, she reflected on her feelings about her boyfriend while she was in prison:

In my mind I was with him for 2 years when I was already arrested and it kind of kept me going [...] I guess, looking back at it, to deal with why I did it [decided to work as a mule]. You know. Why would I do it [trafficking] for something that had no purpose but like OK [when I was in prison, I was thinking] the purpose was still there: we're still together, he's alive. So... That's what I can see after many years that... you know it gave me strength, it helped me not to be scared or totally secluded and a reason to keep going and [think] it was going to be OK. (Paula p. 300).

Paula is reflexive about the function that maintaining her relationships with her partner fulfilled when she was in prison. Nonetheless, despite subsequent reinterpretations of events, she maintains that she decided to do it because of her relationship with her boyfriend. Unlike some other mules, Paula expected to get no benefit from working as a mule:

JF: What were you supposed to get out of the deal? Were you supposed to get anything at all?

That [my boyfriend] would be safe. And out. And his debt would be cancelled.

JF: You weren't expecting to get anything, no money at all?

No. We could just go on with our lives. It's not like I really need money, or needed money. (Paula p. 299).

In all three cases, the threatened loss of a partner and relationship were powerful motivating forces. This is echoed in other research: 'situational pressure such as threatened loss of valued relationships may play a greater role in female offending'. (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996: 467).

### **Romantic love: discussion**

The importance of partners in providing not only contacts, but also motives and meanings for participating in drug trafficking emerged in respondents' narratives. I am

grateful to Torres' for pointing out that 'love' in mules' narratives be considered: 'not as something purely 'irrational' and purely sentimental. But as a social construction which was its own logic and rationality.' (Torres 2006a: 141).

The above stories come from diverse backgrounds, histories and nationalities; nonetheless they all reveal the importance of love relationships. Although the context of drug trafficking was unusual, there was much about the role of 'love' in their narratives that was typical. Writing about love broadly, Fraser contends:

'Women's love relationships are often complicated by the identities – or imagined identities – of being single, being a wife and/or being a mother. Embedded in those identities are instructions about how a woman 'should' be, think and act – instructions that are so contradictory that they create inner conflicts.' (2005: 14)

This is echoed in the narratives above: identities as girlfriends provided meanings and imperatives or actions. Paula's willingness to work as mule to save her boyfriend, Marta's willingness to build a life together and Manuela's excitement about the settling down with her partner all reflect how their identities as 'women in love' made their entry into drug trafficking a meaningful and perhaps even logical action. Lastly, it is interesting to note that women mules were often attempting to uphold traditional gender norms about the importance of love, family and having a stable home that motivated them rather than any discourse of emancipation, status or autonomy.

### **Romance and power: exploitation or agency**

Love relationships are a context in which power relations may be played out (Connell 1987, Fraser 2005). Torres and Sudbury propose differing views of the role of power in trafficking partner relationships. Sudbury concludes that 'women's relationship with male traffickers is one of exploitation, not partnership' (2005: 175). She found that women were relatively powerless in the context of manipulative relationships. In contrast, Torres produces a picture in which three women chose to work as mules to maintain valued relationships; she describes respondents as agents of their decisions.

The women that I spoke to were not simply 'duped' or exploited into working as a mule by their partner: all insisted that they made their own decision. Nonetheless, many were under subtle forms of obligation to their partners (as Marta acknowledges). Furthermore, their decisions were guided by norms which emphasise the importance of love, particularly for women. Narratives here show that love was tied up with obligation and duty.

Although maintaining love relationships was indeed an important consideration; it was not always the sole motivation. Although Paula expected no material reward, Marta and Manuela also expected to gain materially: like several mules above they also hoped to improve their living situations in ways that were otherwise unattainable (as I similarly described in the last section). Thus, although love relationships were important, their importance should be understood in context. Mules' motives were frequently multiple and intertwined incorporating elements of normative gendered identities.

### **Love after arrest: narratives of love in prison**

The ways in which mules narrated their entry into drug trafficking was shaped by the discourses deemed legitimate in the prison context. Although 'love' might be a useful way to frame one's involvement in drug trafficking in normative terms (since it relies on aspects of femininity which are supposedly essential, natural and feminine), respondents were critical about how 'true' their love was once they were arrested. As Paula describes above, maintaining the relationship with the man who was instrumental in recruiting her into drug trafficking was crucial for her to make sense of both her involvement and later her imprisonment. In contrast, other women were much more critical of their partners/recruiters once they were in prison.

All of the women were quickly abandoned by their partners once they were in prison. As such 'doing it for love' was understood somewhat ruefully as a form of deception. Publicly, women were unwilling to admit that they *had* been in love preferring instead to highlight their victimisation by men who had deceived them. In private though, remembering falling in love and subsequently losing it, was sometimes difficult and poignant:

Sometimes I think about revenge but also sometimes thinking better forget because that's also danger [...] and also confused because... being with this guy for so many years, as lovers, living together, promises, being engaged, then I end up in prison and it's like nothing ever happened.

JF: Why revenge?

Revenge because I felt I'd been used, not been loved. I thought that he loved me but then I found out that he used me, you understand how I felt? [...] We'd been together for so many years – suffering together, laughing together, going through everything together. In the beginning [after she was arrested] he was keeping contact, sending money, asking about the lawyers and then he disappeared just like that [clicks fingers]. (Catalina p. 156).

Although privately, 'love' might have been a useful way of coming to terms with imprisonment, narratives of love did not have the same public function that narratives of



economic deprivation and motherhood had. Although 'love' appears to be a genuine motivation in the experiences of these three women, this research does not conclude that partner relations with men involved in trafficking simply cause women to participate in crime. Finally, I would warn against a simplistic interpretation of these relationships: it is only possible to see one side of the story.

### **No motive**

Lastly, one mule found it hard to give a motive for her involvement in trafficking. At the point of interview she had been in prison for about a year. She explained:

Our plan was to get married. [My boyfriend and I] came back [from my home country], met the wrong people, a group of Colombians and I swallowed almost a kilo of heroin. It didn't seem real to me. It didn't seem like I was really going to do it until it was too late to back out.

[...]

[It was] not for money really because I had a good job, my family is middle class, my father is [a professional in the Criminal Justice System] and my mum's a teacher so it wasn't for the money and I wanted to just study and finish my University. I think it was because I didn't actually think I was going to go through with it and it was kind of like the risky thing going on, it was really something I had never imagined and kind of exciting and interesting.

[...]

[my family] never asked me why I did it and I'm glad that they didn't ask me because I really didn't have an answer. (Caroline, 2003: 8)

After a year in prison thinking about it, Caroline still claimed that she had no particular motive. Nonetheless, she claimed that she alone was responsible for her involvement. Academic and popular writing has often approached women mules' involvement as somehow 'extraordinary', largely since traditional conceptions of femininity based on caring, women's place in the home with the family are contradictory to macho conceptualisations of the drug trade. Nonetheless, Caroline's experience shows that why women do *not* get involved in trafficking may be an equally salient question.

One interpretation of Caroline's involvement in mule-work is as a form of 'drift'. Matza's theory of delinquency and drift requires that the actor has access to the possibility of doing the crime: both 'morally' in that she must come to see it as unproblematic and 'technically' since the crime must seem possible (Matza 1964: 184). The offer of mule-work provided both these elements: it was presented to her as something relatively easy to do and due to the element of sub cultural support, morally unproblematic too. These themes will be developed further in the next chapter.

## Attractions: travel, excitement and a free holiday

As well as the main motivating factors cited above, respondents cited different attractions to mule work:

I'm thinking great, a way to *get out*, you know. I'd just come out of prison, you know. I'm thinking it's gonna be excellent. I can go on a vacation, it was supposed to be for 1 week, everyone's gonna pay for it and I can do whatever I want. I mean how fucking sweet is that? (Marta p. 172)

It was a spur of the moment decision and along with it came excitement because I was going to do something really daring. (Sharon, 2003: 13).

The prospect of travel was often met with excitement, particularly for those who had no passport or had never been abroad. This 'draw' was felt strongly by Catalina, an experienced mule:

It was the 1<sup>st</sup> 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. (p. 179).

For others travelling was a means of escape and respite from extremely stressful lives marked by economic hardship, crisis, responsibility and instability.

I wanted to go and never come back, like when the plane took off in [home] I was like bye. [more singsong] Good byeeee! You know like, I'm *leaving*! Like I was disappearing. Like something from the twilight zone. (Amanda p.88)

Excitement about leaving was also bound up with conflicting emotions. I asked Amanda what she was thinking about when she was considering working as a mule:

Amanda was trying to talk to Amanda.

JF: what was she trying to say?

(laughing). She was trying, but it was like two Amanda's. It was the evil Amanda and the good Amanda. You know like 'Don't do this, there's ways out. You always got through it. What's wrong with you! You know you always found a way out. This is not the end of it!'

[Change of voice to indicate the evil Amanda] 'I'm gonna lose everything. I might as well lose everything'.

[...] I'm thinking yeah I love my kids n everything but my baby's father's eventually gonna destroy me. And he's gonna kill me. And I have to escape from him. Cause if

I don't escape from him it was to the point that I was gonna kill him. I was already arrested twice for beating him. You know. I was becoming an excessive drinker and, you know the marijuana turned to cocaine every now and then and I know it would have got worse. Because I saw it happen before.

[...]

But it's like I wasn't only a mother to my kids. I was a mother to [children's father]. I was a mother to my *mother*; I was a mother to... I was just tired, I was too tired... I just wanted to be alone and then when I came here n I'm alone, I don't want to be alone' (p.88/89)

Earlier in this chapter I described Amanda's motive as she first gave it to me: bills, debt and financial crisis for the whole family. As I got to know her better and in subsequent interviews, her account of leaving and making the decision became increasingly complex: a chaotic picture of drug use, domestic violence, stress, love for her partner, kids and family all emerged as important. Although Amanda's case may be the most complex, it is illustrative of the kinds of contradictions and emotionality that occurred in the accounts of many mules.

### **Overview and discussion**

Unravelling women's motives were complex. It necessitated careful and reflexive listening, repeated interviews and gentle probing to get beyond the standard 'front of house' performances. In analysis, reflexive interpretation and close attention to the meanings of femininity and the strategic adoption of victim status in prison were important ways to understand what was being said. Doing so has revealed the complex and sometimes contradictory layers of obligation and hope which motivated women to work as mules.

Mules are not a homogenous group and motives were multiple and sometimes contradictory. Thus, any attempt to generalise inevitably irons out much of the complexity. Nonetheless, some common themes underpinned mules' motives.

Motives	Women	Men
Immediate financial concerns (debts)	Amanda Donna	Graham
Long term financial concerns: deprivation with no chance of change	Bonny Angela Marta Marta	Frank
Material betterment for self not related to debt or perceived deprivation		Michael Frank
Material benefit for self and others: not related to deprivation or debt	Catalina Donna Mandalina Manuela Marta Tanya	
Romantic love and relationships	Marta Manuela Catalina Paula	
Threat (to others)	Paula Marina	Howard Graham
No motive	Caroline	

*Respondents' motives*

A key finding of this research is that although financial and economic concerns were important motivations in the accounts of many mules, it was not always the only or the most important motive. Romantic love was also an important part of women's motivation although it was not always the only or the most important aspect of motive. Thus, rather than providing motivation towards mule-work in themselves, love is perhaps better considered as background contexts in which working as a mule was a meaningful action. The next chapter will examine more closely women's decision to work as a mule.

This research builds on previous studies of women's motives in a number of ways. The first is that by recruiting mules from diverse backgrounds and including male mules, I have been able to reflect the heterogeneity of mules' motives and also show that there are some similarities between male and female mules. Narrative methods have also exposed the complex nature of motivation and exposed contradictions and overlaps which one-off interviews have been unable to access.

### **Doing motives, doing gender**

Although this research approached women's offending with the assumption that gender might not be the most salient social structure, gendered identities played an important role in women's motives. Although I set out to look beyond normative forms of female

gender, many women appeared to be motivated by remarkably traditional forms of femininity: love, family, provisioning and making a stable home. Although this may have been an aspect of narrating one's story in a way to avoid the stigma of criminality, these normative concerns nonetheless appeared to have played a part in motivating respondents toward mule work for the benefit of their family. Although criminality and femininity have often been portrayed as contradictory (see for example Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, Messerschmidt 1993), respectable femininity was approached pragmatically by respondents: 'to be a do-right woman [...] sometimes you've got to do wrong' (Wurtzel 1998: 2).

Nonetheless, it is impossible to separate gender from other social structures which are co-constitutive: family status, age, generation, class and ethnicity were all important in various narratives of motives. In addition to gendered identities, women's motives also spoke of their position in the 'gender order' (Connell 1987). Financial crises, debts and general deprivation were often related to women's social structural position: as head of household in precarious or under-employment. Thus, 'women's situated action is as much a response to and negotiation with gender inequality as it is a resource for accomplishing gender.' (Miller 2002: 452).

Lastly, unlike prior research which has largely conceived social structures as outside of the individual and therefore pushing them into mule-work, this research found that social structures (particularly in the form of gendered identities) did not exist solely external to the actor, but were also internal in respondents identities. Thus, respondents motives demonstrate that 'social structures organise the way individuals think about their circumstances and generate methods for dealing with them.' (Messerschmidt 1993:77).

### **Doing crime to do gender or gender to do crime?**

Rarely could respondents be said to be doing crime as a way to accomplish gender (Messerschmidt 1993). Some cases could be read as evidence of 'doing gender', for example where the act of working as a mule was in itself significant: where it was an act of love, sacrifice and duty to solve problems facing one's family. However, overall there was little evidence in this sample that either men or women engaged in mule-work as a way of accomplishing a gendered identity. Whilst gendered identity was highly visible in mule's motives and plans for how they would spend money when they returned, in the majority of cases doing mule-work was not seen as a way to do gender (at least in part because it is a hidden activity largely constructed alone. Overall though, it was not the act of mule-work in

itself that was the accomplishment, rather what would happen after the event: sending children to a better school, setting up home with a partner and so on.

In contrast Miller proposes that woman 'do gender' as a way of accomplishing crime: 'women also react to and strategically draw from normative beliefs about femininity in order to accomplish crime' (Miller 2002: 454). Although women did draw on forms of normative gender in order to form motives to 'do' crime, women's desire to fulfil normative femininity often provided a motivation to work as a mule, looking at motive alone is not sufficient to address Miller's hypothesis: I will examine the role that gender played in accomplishing crime in chapters 9 and 10.

### **Intersectionalities and contexts**

Although 'gender' broadly defined was important in shaping respondents' motives, a number of other social structures (which are mutually constitutive) were important. It is difficult to describe these without breaking confidentiality however I can hint at their significance: growing up under communism, apartheid or in rural south East Asia for example profoundly shape the meanings of first class travel and having a passport.

In addition to intersectionalities, historical events were also important. For example the effects of the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York on the 11<sup>th</sup> Sept 2001 reverberated around the world economy and reverberate into several accounts including one single mother of Puerto Rican descent living in Brooklyn who lost her job and found escape from debt in working as a mule. Lastly, the foregrounds of offending also shaped respondents motives in profound ways which (again) cannot be fully described here. For example, the death of a relative or deportation to another country profoundly shaped how respondents ordered their priorities.

### **Victimisation or emancipation?**

It is difficult to conclude that women's participation in mule-work is a result of either emancipation or victimisation. Although some cases read on their own might add support to either thesis, in many cases, elements of both structural subordination and ideologies of emancipation were evident. Furthermore, emancipation and victimisation were not mutually exclusive: women in deprived circumstances may not have seen themselves as victimised or as structurally subordinated. Conversely, women from countries in which women were relatively 'emancipated' may see themselves as victimised by abusive partners, or a social justice system which 'armed men and disarms women' (Connell 1987: 126).

Researching women mules from around the world adds a level of complexity to the meanings of both 'emancipation' and 'victimisation'. Prior studies which have proselytised the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis have largely left definitions of 'poverty' unexplored. In contrast, this research points to the need for a more complex understanding of the role of both financial deprivation and a wish for financial betterment as important in a variety of diverse social contexts.

## CHAPTER 8: ACCEPTING MULE-WORK: INFORMED CONSENT, RISKS AND 'RATIONAL' CHOICES

### Introduction

This chapter concludes the trio of chapters examining mules' entry into drug trafficking. The question of whether respondents' involvement in mule-work was purposive or the result of coercion has been implicit in the last two substantive chapters; this chapter brings this question to the fore. Here, I examine how women made decisions to work as a mule and how they did so in choices not of their own choosing.

First I recap existing research on women's decision to work as a mule. Next I re-examine Emirbayer and Mische's framework for agency. The remainder of the chapter examines the circumstances in which mules made the decision to get involved in trafficking, how they perceived risks and benefits and to what extent their decisions were 'rational' and in what ways they were agential.

### **Published accounts of mules' decision to enter drug trafficking**

Since research on women's mules concludes that women mules have been 'tricked, trapped or compelled' into working as a mule, there leaves little space in which to consider if and how mules made a decision:

'Many couriers referred to the psychological processes involved in arriving at the decision to become involved in drug trafficking. For some *there was little financial scope for reflection* but all had to deal with moral anxieties, fear and trepidation' (Green 1998: 91, my emphasis).

This conception of women criminals being 'swept up' into crime is prevalent in theoretical approaches to women's apparently economically motivated offending more widely:

Women criminals thus tend to emerge in theoretical accounts as passive actors rather than strategising resisters and the possibility that women offend rationally and purposefully still tends to be ruled out.' (Davies 2005: 57).

Furthermore, the common assumption that mules are naïve or uneducated has only served to close off rather than open up avenues for research surrounding mules as decision-makers. In contrast through, studies of (male) traffickers are largely underpinned by rational choice perspectives. This is explicit in the research by Desroches (2005), implicit in other



research (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007) and underpins the contemporary move towards confiscation orders designed to make trafficking unprofitable (Lander 2007; SOCA 2006a; SOCA 2008b)<sup>57</sup>. The rational choice perspective is based on ‘an assumption that offenders seek to benefit themselves by their criminal behaviour; that this involves the making of choices, however rudimentary on occasion these processes might be; and that these processes exhibit a measure of rationality, albeit constrained by limits of time and ability and the availability of relevant information.’ (Cornish and Clarke 1986a: 1). Davies elaborates: ‘The choice that offenders make is deemed rational in that the offender engages in a cost-benefit analysis. This type of analysis is therefore an economic one. It entails calculating and weighing up the risks of detection, capture and punishment on one hand against the material rewards, benefits and satisfactions on the other.’ (2005: 59).

Conversely, some researchers have found that women involved in drug dealing may be logical, purposeful and rational (Morgan and Joe 1996) or as a rational acknowledgement of entrepreneurial opportunity (Hobbs 1995: 23). This chapter will therefore explore if and to what extent women’s entry into mule-work can be considered rational and purposeful.

This research focuses on women mules’ first entry into drug trafficking. Although previous chapters have included data from experienced mules, this chapter does not. Many experienced mules had spent many years in the business and their accounts of the first time were not so well remembered and were occasionally subject to overly romanticised retellings<sup>58</sup>.

### **Mules’ own account of their agency**

Examining to what extent mules participation might be considered purposeful or agential is not straightforward. The term agency ‘has maintained an elusive, albeit resonant vagueness’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). With this in mind, it is worth placing respondents’ own interpretations to the fore.

With the exception of those mules who were ‘set up’, *all* mules (including those who were threatened) claimed that they made a decision to work as a mule. Although respondents stressed the purposeful nature of their decision, respondents were nonetheless quick to highlight the limited circumstances and pressures (including coercion and obligation) that

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<sup>57</sup> ‘It’s all about money, stupid. The organised criminals are doing this for money. These are acquisitive crimes. It’s all about money. So getting at the money and the profit from organised crime is likely to be a more effective lever than some others’. (Lander 2007: 2).

<sup>58</sup> Hobbs warns against the danger of over reliance on the accounts of ex-criminals’ reminiscences of their halcyon days as a successful criminal (1995: 4).

shaped available choices and actions. Nonetheless, there is little point in simply describing what mules did and declaring it all 'agential'.

Emirbayer and Mische break down agency into three aspects (which are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and intertwined). Doing so is a useful way to disaggregate different aspects of agential action. The three elements are:

**Routine:** habitual and unreflected practices

**Purpose:** imaginative projection towards a goal

**Judgement:** practical-evaluative elements, weighing up risks

Rather than asking 'were mules agents or not?' this chapter instead explores the context and process of decision-making and the ways mules decisions can be considered agential.

### **Mules perceptions of risk**

The last chapter examined the perceived benefits that mules hoped to gain from working as a mule. This section examines the risks which mules perceived when they were making their decision.

### **Arrest and imprisonment**

Mules most frequently cited risk of detection by police or customs as an important consideration<sup>59</sup>. All but one mule was aware of the possibility that they could get arrested<sup>60</sup> if they failed to pass customs (willing and coerced, female and male).

Two men who recruited mules suggested that women were more likely to be deterred by the risk of arrest and imprisonment:

Women seem to think about the arrest more, it tends to put them off, for example women I've tried to get to work as a mule. [...] They've got more to lose, they're more aware of the consequences. Maternal instincts, they've got children. Men seem to be less bothered by having kids and responsibility, that's probably it.' (Ryan p.22)

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<sup>59</sup> Conversely research on men in organising and managing roles did not consider arrest to be a serious deterrent (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007: vii).

<sup>60</sup> I found this difficult to believe, however when I probed her she confirmed that she did not consider that she might get arrested.

Women wimp out more than men; women think more, speak more, communicate more. They think up the odds more, see things that men might not see and perhaps they're not happy with the risk. (Paul 2003, p.4)

Interestingly, this claim was not echoed by Donna who also recruited mules.

Although mules were aware of the risk of arrest, few knew what would happen after they were arrested. Some mules did not believe that arrest would be followed by prison<sup>61</sup>. Some expected to receive sentences of less than three years if they were arrested. Few considered that they might be imprisoned in a foreign country; many were told that they would simply be deported if they were arrested.

It is impossible to account for risk of arrest in any objective way. Law enforcement agencies continually emphasise the effectiveness of their detection technologies (for example the Ionscan machine described in chapter 4) conversely, almost all professional traffickers, mule watchers, recruiters and contacts that I spoke to were convinced that very few mules were caught. The simple fact that sending drugs by mule continues in spite of increasing arrests worldwide confirms that this method of transportation remains possible and profitable. Despite having access to the combined knowledge of respondents and the current body of available research on drug trafficking to hand, it is impossible to estimate the odds of a mule getting caught. Mules had to make their assessment on the basis of considerably less information.

### **Risk of death from capsules bursting**

Four respondents swallowed capsules of drugs (Caroline, Paula: first time mules; Lorenzo on his first trip and later as a sole entrepreneur; and Mandalina). Mules knew from the start that the 'contract' was to swallow capsules (or pellets) of cocaine. Risk of death from capsules bursting or leaking was not mentioned as a consideration when choosing to accept the trip.

Early on in fieldwork, Carlos (a Colombian broker of cocaine) showed me a capsule of cocaine which has just arrived into the men's prison (presumably smuggled in by a visitor). It was slightly longer and fatter than an 'AA' sized battery. As Carlos unwrapped it, he counted out seven layers. These included multiple layers of latex, one of carbon paper and a final layer of candle wax, which he claimed stomach acid cannot dissolve<sup>62</sup>. This

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<sup>61</sup> Although some professionals had an idea of the length of sentence they might receive (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Research by Kelly, Corrigan et al. also found capsules which were covered in a hard shell. These 'type IV capsules were the most likely to pass through without bursting (2007).

represented considerable hours of work (given that a mule can swallow about 100 capsules) and research.

Lorenzo is an independent trafficker who makes and swallows his own capsules of cocaine. When I asked him about the risk of the capsules breaking, he described how once he had driven a truck over one to see what would happen: the capsule was a bit bent out of shape but survived the ordeal without breaking. Lorenzo made several trips a year for several years without experiencing any problems. I do not wish to downplay the fact that many drug mules die from swallowing capsules of cocaine (and heroin) which burst causing intoxication quickly followed by death: there are many documented incidents in medical journals and forensic scholarship (Deitel and Syed 1973; Heinemann, et al. 1998; Kelly, et al. 2007; Stewart, et al. 1990; Traub, et al. 2003) and in the press (Boseley and Radford 1992; Morris 2007; Stuart 2003).

Nonetheless, it is impossible to begin to estimate objectively what the chances are of capsules bursting and causing intoxication, injury or death. Although some forensic research has claimed that the quality of capsules appears to be becoming mechanised and possibly improving to make it safer (Traub, et al. 2003; Veyrie, et al. 2008), these studies were conducted in western Europe and cannot be considered representative of global trends in capsule manufacture. Between the mid 1990's and 2000 between one and three mules are found to be dead on arrival at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam (Zaitch 2002: 149).

I would suggest that the quality of capsules as well as the guidance and care with which they are administered is an important variable: some will be carefully made at significant cost and labour, others will be badly, hurriedly or cheaply made. It seems reasonable to suppose that it is these capsules which have a greater potential to be fatal. This supposition is borne out in medical research into body packing. Kelly, Corrigan et al have developed a typology of 'capsules':

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***Classification by category of packages used for ingestion by drug smugglers.***

Type I	Loosely packed cocaine covered by two to four layers of condoms or other latex-like material. This type has the highest risk for leakage/rupture.
Type II	Tightly packed cocaine powder or paste covered in multiple layers of tubular latex
Type III	Tightly packed cocaine powder or paste covered by aluminium foil.
Type IV	Dense cocaine paste is placed into a device, condensed and hardened. This is then packaged in tough tubular latex. This is then covered with coloured paraffin or fibreglass. It is always radio-opaque, rendering it easily identifiable on plain X-ray of the abdomen.

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***Classification by category of packages used for ingestion by drug smugglers***

*(adapted from Kelly, et al. 2007)*

It is worth reiterating that the methods of transportation are largely shaped by methods of detection employed. Kelly and Corrigan note that the first three types of capsule are radiolucent (and are difficult to spot by normal x-ray). The last type of capsule is the least likely to rupture, but the most easily detected by x-ray.

### **Risk of arrest versus risk of swallowing capsules**

Mandalina agreed to this method of transportation from the start like all the mules who agreed to swallow capsules of cocaine<sup>63</sup>. Her contact explained that the chances of arrest were high and ‘hiding’ the cocaine inside her body was much safer. In her country punishment for trafficking drugs included life imprisonment and potentially the death penalty<sup>64</sup>. In this instance, any risk that the capsules posed was subjugated by a more apparent risk of arrest. Thus, it is important to remember that risks were subjective and relative to different locales. Respondents were often balancing hierarchies of risks: this is examined later in the chapter.

### **Assessing risks**

Mules’ information on and assessment of risks was based on tacit knowledge (in particular the press) but was mostly dependent on information provided by their contact. Mules were reassured by their contacts who often told respondents that:

- the police are paid off
- no one ever gets caught
- this is a safe route
- the drugs are packed in a way that cannot be detected
- if there is any problem we will pay for a lawyer and you will be released
- the police cannot prove the package is yours so you will not go to jail.

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<sup>63</sup> Although all agreed to swallow cocaine, Caroline found out that she had swallowed capsules of heroin after she was arrested.

<sup>64</sup> A report published by the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in 2001 identified 33 countries in which capital punishment (including the death penalty) were applied as punishment for trafficking drugs. These countries are: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, China, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, the United States (federal law) Uzbekistan and Vietnam. (Lines 2007: 17).

It is impossible to say if the police were ever really paid off, or if there really are routes that are safer than others. Nonetheless, the fact that I was interviewing arrested mules suggests that these may have been half-truths at best<sup>65</sup>.

The believability of these reassurances was reliant on the relationship between the mule and the contact. In chapter six, I described how mules met their initial 'contact' in drug trafficking. Many were friends, boyfriends and family friends, or through working in the drugs business. Most mules did not know much about drug trafficking and all relied on information from their initial contact to inform them about the business.

### *Trust in contacts*

Where mules knew their contacts well (where they were partners or close friends) they trusted them to guide them through something they knew nothing about. Marta interpreted the way her partner helped organise the trip as a reflection of their relationship:

He said to me you're not going to carry it in your stomach: it's very dangerous. So I'm thinking ok, this guy really cares. (Marta p. 171).

Similarly, Anika was recruited by friends of her husband. They had a long standing relationship and were tied together socially through her husband. These links served to reassure her:

I was thinking it was safe because I trusted them. (Anika, 2003 p.17).

Several mules were recruited into working as a mule through a trusted friend. They often deferred judgements of risk or danger to their contacts who were people that they knew well and trusted who had greater experience. Some accounts of men and women recruited by a friend were underpinned by the rationale (at that time) that their partner would not have got them involved if it was dangerous. Obviously, this assumption was challenged by their arrest and imprisonment. In the previous chapter I described women's experiences of being deserted by their partners after they were arrested.

### *Knowing other successful mules*

Several mules were recruited through other mules who had successfully made one or more trips. Knowing another mule who was successful had a powerful reassuring effect which countered perceptions of risk:

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<sup>65</sup>At worst, respondents may have been set up as decoys to divert customs officers (who had been tipped off by the organisers) to allow another mule with considerably more drugs through undetected.

I'd seen the deals go through in Brazil, I believed it. (Marta, p.171)

Amanda elected to work as a mule after seeing a family friend successfully make a trip to Ecuador as a drugs mule. Her friend was able to reassure her that she had gone through and in particular that the suitcase had even passed the sniffer dogs at the airport.

Similarly, Howard was reassured by his contact's claim that the package of drugs that he was to carry had already passed through 1st customs once:

Him telling me that he had already passed customs was the key, key, key point [knocking on table to emphasise words] that he had already passed the inspection, you know.

JF: And so in some ways you were kind of assured about the risk?

I was assured, yes. I don't know if he passed or if he had an inspection. I don't know what goes on but I presume – international border – there's an inspection, you know? Coming from Colombia they want to see your bags. (Howard, p. 271).

Zaitch similarly concludes that 'strong identification with surrounding successful couriers' (2005: 149) reduced mules' conception of risk.

#### *Reassurance from professional traffickers*

Caroline received a comprehensive 'risk analysis' from her contact, a professional 'contact' who looked after her before she was due to travel.

They [contacts] told me that there was no risk because I had entered [that country] before and because I had an innocent face, I was 18 you know. The lady that gave me the drugs she said that she had sent so many people and nobody got caught - there's no problem, so I didn't think about the risk. (Caroline, 2003)

#### *Previous experience working in the drugs business*

Assessment of risk was also influenced by respondents' histories of working in the drug business in different capacities. Only a minority had this kind of experience: Michael drove drugs around Europe. He did not consider that inter-continental trafficking (travelling by air instead of road) would be significantly more dangerous than the work he had been doing previously. Furthermore, his conception of risk was heavily influenced by his past experiences:

When something is new it's dangerous because of the fear of the unknown. When you start off it's dangerous but when you continue, it becomes fun. (Michael 2003: 32)

This conception of risk is underpinned by gendered relationships to risk. This was never a point of view I heard articulated by female mules, or even experienced female mules. Jansen was an experienced mule. He had travelled widely and had been imprisoned before on another trip as a mule before he was arrested in Ecuador. When he talked about the risk involved in trafficking he became animated and seemed pleased to regale me with tales of his travels around the world. Ryan told me about making a trip carrying drugs across Europe: 'it was an amazing rush; I was on a natural high for about 2 days afterwards.' (p.18).

Conversely, Donna did not feel any 'rush' afterwards. She told me about her first trip as a mule. She found passing through customs incredibly stressful. Nonetheless she passed an inspection without problems and went straight to her friend's (and contact) house:

I said that's the 1st n last time I'm doing that shit! (laughs) I took everything off in front of him, I got naked in front of him, I took my skirt off, I took everything off n go 'here's your fucking drugs!' I put on my [trousers] n I went home.

JF: how come you said you were never going to do it again?

It was scary! It was scary. (Donna p.209).

### **Seeking information from other sources**

Some mules did talk about working as a mule with people they were close to. Caroline and Sharon's partners were not working with the contacts. Both strongly disapproved of their partner's decision to work as a mule: both couples fought about their decision. In general, mules rarely sought information about trafficking from outside sources. Many mules were often explicitly told not to speak to anyone 'outside' about working as a mule. Although rarely some mules did speak to close friends and sometimes uninvolved partners about what they were doing, 'not speaking' and therefore not seeking information from anyone else except immediate contacts was couched in social relationships of trust and confidence.

### ***Relationships***

Paranoid and possessive behaviour was sometimes built on norms of jealousy in relationships:



After the meeting [with the 'contacts'] he also threatened me with the police if I tried to leave him. Then after that he was always by me, we were sleeping together again and I was thinking that everything was good. He was with me when the trip started to make sure that I didn't change my mind. He brought me to the airport and he was saying goodbye like I will come back soon. (Manuela p.236).

### *Stigma*

The feeling of stigma surrounding agreeing to work in the drugs industry contributed to women mules' decisions to not seek advice from people they knew. Women in particular said that they could not discuss their decision to work as a mule with others for fear of stigma. Interestingly, Marta talked with a woman that she knew who was a prostitute. As a woman in a stigmatised profession, Marta identified her as a person who would not stigmatise her for considering working as a drugs mule.

### *Coercion*

Marina was coerced by her contact (who had kidnapped her daughter): this gave her very little leverage to ask for information. Furthermore, once she had decided that she would make the trip for the safety of her daughter, knowing what she was about to do held little import.

### *Not thinking about the risk; not wanting to know*

Although some mules did consider the risks involved, some did not:

I totally didn't think about it to be honest. (Sharon 2003 p.14)

Furthermore, some mules did not want to know:

JF: Were you thinking about that when you were doing it?

No, when I got caught, cause I didn't know what I was carrying until after.

JF: So you thought you were carrying cocaine?

I didn't know what I was carrying.

JF: You didn't *want* to know?

Yeah, exactly. I didn't want to know (laughs). (Amanda, p.68/9)

This was echoed by other mules, particularly those who agreed quickly to work as a mule. Lastly, mules often saw no practical point in asking others for advice on the risk: friends, family and other associates were rarely any better informed than mules themselves.

### **Time pressure**

JF: It almost seems like you didn't have time to stop and really think...

Right. I didn't have time and maybe [...] I didn't want to. You know, part of it could be just like alright: this is what I've got to do, that is the goal, this is the means to the goal, forget about it, keep thinking about the goal. (Paula p.303)

Paula had little time to think and to weigh up her options. Her plane was due to leave later that day and she had to make a quick decision while her boyfriend was on the phone from Europe and his 'Colombian friend' in the room. Although Paula emphasised that she *could* have said no, it is clear that this set-up and particularly the time limit, demanded that she make a decision quickly and under significant pressure.

Time pressure featured in several other accounts, particularly where mules were under threat or coercion, or where debts were impending. Nonetheless, many stated that it was a quick decision: once the offer was proposed, many respondents accepted on the spur of the moment. It is however, a very different thing to have to make split second decisions where time pressure has been imposed compared to making the decision quickly off your own back.

### **Partial information**

Mules rarely sought information from any source except their contact. As a result, they had to rely on partial (and partisan) information about what mule work would entail and the risks they were running. Mules were typically provided with a variety of partial truths about the work they were about to undertake. Some were told that they were going to one country and then were sent to another (sometimes another continent). Mules carrying heroin were usually under the impression that they were carrying cocaine instead. This only became apparent when mules were arrested.

### **Partial information: the mule-recruiter's perspective**

Interviews with recruiters and investors confirmed that providing mules with limited (or sometimes fabricated) information may be common practice.

One afternoon I was sitting in the patio of the prison talking to Ryan about sending mules. He explained to me their current scheme of chemical camouflage (and at my request) explained to me how he would outline the deal to a mule. Several kilos of cocaine would be chemically camouflaged as part of some sporting equipment. He explained that it did not look or smell like cocaine; you could cut it, melt it, put it in water and it would maintain its integrity. Ryan was careful to emphasise that this was not an amateur job; white powder was not going to start spilling out of rickety suitcases.

Next he explained that he would always give the mule a cover story in case of arrest. In one such cover story, the mule would claim to be carrying the sports equipment (in which the drugs were concealed) home for someone else they had met travelling as a favour. He could even set up an e-mail address to show that the mule had corresponded with this person. This was a plausible cover story. Ecuador is an international tourist centre and home to the Galapagos Islands with a variety of sports available: mountaineering, water sports, kayaking, cycling and many more. A large volume of tourists pass through Ecuador each year; it was typical to see surfboards, diving or climbing gear and mountain bikes on flights into Quito. Many tourists are young backpackers and there is a friendly backpacking scene that would make this kind of interaction common. Furthermore, he explained to me convincingly (in spite of my prior knowledge to the contrary) that if the mule *was* caught their case would be watertight in a court of law. Since they could 'prove' that they had no idea that they were carrying drugs (due to the highly effective chemical camouflage) and could legitimately claim that they were carrying it home on behalf of someone they had met backpacking (and would be able to produce their e mail address and correspondence as proof) the court could not hold the mule legally responsible and would have to let them go.

In part, Ryan was so convincing because of the way he portrayed himself: as professional, friendly and concerned for the mule. He also explained that whenever it was possible he would meet the mule to hand over the drugs. As much as this had an important function of making sure that nothing went wrong (i.e. drugs 'going missing') he said that he would also 'make the mule feel comfortable, send them on a holiday, let them think you're taking care of them.' (p.24):

That's how come I could recruit people. I can persuade them in person, I know the in's and out's. I can make it sound extremely good. [But] obviously there's more risk than I can make out. (Ryan, p.23)

His account successfully played up the ease and professionalism of the project and addresses the key risks addressed by mules above.

## Informed consent?

Many mules had little information about what exactly mule-work would entail and few knew with accuracy what drug, what weight and how it would be concealed. Indeed, some did not understand well what exactly the trip would involve:

He said travel to Ecuador and he said they come to my hotel and they would bring the drugs then I have to eat it. [...]

JF: You said that you were told that you had to eat the capsules. Did you know anything about that before?

Nothing. (Mandalina p. 255).

Mandalina later told me that she did not know where Ecuador was. Although she had travelled around Asia before, she knew nothing about Latin America.

Although giving partial information was common practice, some mules based their decision on detailed and accurate information. Marta was given a detailed description of what she was going to do by her boyfriend and his friend who was the contact. She concluded that it was pretty straightforward:

I had to go bra shopping and I bought 2 cream bras, it had to be cream and um one was one size bigger which was the outside one and they put it in the cups and sew it up and then you just put it on and it fits around your breasts, you understand, you just look a lot bigger. And I thought well *that sounds pretty fucking easy*, you know. (Marta, p.172, my emphasis.)

Although some mules were perhaps purposefully provided with only partial information from their contacts, many mules paid little attention what or how much they would be carrying. Furthermore, kilo amounts were often meaningless when mules had no context in which to judge what a reasonable (or unreasonable) quantity would be.

Yeah, I know it's a lot [5 kilos]. I didn't think about it though, you know. I just wanted to do it fast, get the money and just forget about everything you understand. (Anika, 2003)

Quantitative research on people arrested carrying drugs at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in the UK found that women were more likely to be carrying a greater quantity of drugs and drugs of a higher grade (Harper et al. 2000). The authors interpreted this as 'risk taking' behaviour. In the light of this research however, it seems that carrying drugs of a higher class, or carrying a greater weight of drugs may not be indicative of intentional risk

taking. Many mules did not know what they were carrying. Mules in this sample were often carrying either more drugs, or different drugs to the ones that they believed they were carrying. The gendered element to this however, remains enigmatic. Due to the small number of male mules interviewed for this research it is difficult to tell if women were either more likely to be uninformed or less aware of what they were doing.

Although this research does not have the data to unravel this apparent gender paradox, some possible hypotheses can be developed. Harper et al.'s quantitative data is based on people who were arrested with drugs (2000). However it is impossible to know whether they were mules, independent entrepreneurs or perhaps part of a small collective: all appear identical at the point of arrest. However, their status may have an important effect on the quantity of drugs smuggled.

Firstly, carrying a larger quantity of drugs simply requires a larger investment. People carrying their own drugs (either as entrepreneurs or part of small collectives) may be less likely to attempt to carry larger quantities of drugs. Sending more drugs requires more investment and sometimes more sophisticated means of packaging. It seems logical that if a person or collective had these resources at hand, they would be more likely to send a mule than take the risk themselves.

It also seems possible that women are more likely to be mules than solo entrepreneurs or working as part of a collective. Harper et al.'s data seems to back this hypothesis up: women were significantly less likely to be arrested as meeters/greeters at the airport (2000).

### **Hierarchy of competing risks**

Despite the emphasis on risk here, in fact 'risk' was not that prominent in respondents' narratives. I frequently had to probe them about the risks involved and how they weighed up the risks. Mules' responses spoke of a much wider range of risks than arrest and imprisonment. Largely this reflected the multiple and competing risks that respondents had to take into account. In Graham's account:

I took the risk rather than my brother because even though I knew there was a risk that I'd go to jail, they might kill my brother for drugs' (Graham, 2003, p.2)

Where there was the very real and immediate risk of bills to be paid and violent retribution, the risk of arrest seemed less immediate. Although Graham identified this as a

very real possibility, it was a lesser risk (not only to himself but to his extended family) for him to make the trip.

Where risks emanated from explicit threat from someone known (Paula's boyfriend was being threatened, Howard's partner and Marina's daughter) respondents were faced with difficult decisions *between* different risks. Their concerns with risk did not centre on whether working as a mule was likely to be beneficial to themselves or not, they were rather faced with difficult decisions between two unappealing options: put a loved one at risk (and this threat was often immediate and apparent) or take their chances as a mule (where risks were less tangible and less immediate).

However, not all risks resulted from interpersonal threat. Amanda's decision to work as a mule was made against the threat of impending homelessness for all the family. Lastly, risk did not play a significant role in all mules' decisions. For example, Frank's decision to work as a mule was driven by his desire for better and an assessment that the gamble was worth the risk.

### **Why mule-work? Alternatives for raising revenue**

Where men and women are motivated to work as a mule by financial need (either crisis of long term deprivation), it is worth considering what the alternatives were? Why not legal work, or why not other types of crime? Respondents provided a variety of reasons for involvement in mule-work over legal/other types of illegal activities for profit.

Respondents who were in situations of general deprivation, mule-work simply offered a route to material gain where legal opportunities for income generation were blocked or very limited. For example, Frank cited his ill health (he was registered as disabled) as a reason why he could not work legally. For him, mule-work offered an opportunity where none other (legitimate or not) was available. This echoes Merton's strain theory (1968): he contended that when legitimate routes to material gain/status are blocked (usually by poverty of education, structural subordination etc.), individuals will take illegitimate routes. For Frank (and Anika and others) working as a mule was a 'quick fix': an opportunity for immediate and considerable improvement in their circumstances.

A minority of mules (men and women) were involved in illegal economic enterprise prior to their involvement in trafficking: prostitution, selling drugs and fraud were all cited. Their move to trafficking represented diversification of criminal activity. Along with a larger economic gain, mule-work was seen by some as a more 'respectable' form of income generation strategy:

The only person that knew was E [...]. She was 19 and was working as a prostitute through the internet. [...] I met her one day when she was picking up her cheque. She said why don't you think about it?

JF: Prostitution?

Yeah. She said come and sit at the bar and see how it goes. So, OK, I went, I hung out. I couldn't do it. There's no way I can fucking do it! So from there... I had to do trafficking.

[...]

JF: What would have been your other options?

It was hard and it still is to get work. I've worked once in my life in an office – I couldn't do it! [My profession] didn't really exist [in this country] and what there was, was a big drop in salary. It doesn't boost your ego now, does it? I felt like, how have you fucked your life up? (Marta, p. 217)

Marta's sense of identity was strong. She wanted to be able to provide for her daughter and on her own terms, but she wanted to do so on her own terms marked out by independence. She also highlighted how recent deportation and resulting unemployment had dented her self esteem considerably.

Manuela had worked as a prostitute for many years before she got involved in mule-work. Her boyfriend made it very clear that he did not like her working as a prostitute and suggested mule-work as an alternative way to make money with a view to desistance from crime in the long term.

Interestingly, the majority of mules had no history of being involved in crime. Many were gainfully employed when they accepted mule-work. Prior to the offer of mule-work, few had ever considered other illegal forms of income generation; they did not have the know-how, skills, contacts or opportunities. However, once the opportunity arose, the motive frequently followed:

Motivation is distinct from opportunity but the two often intertwine, as when opportunity enhances temptation. [...] Like male offenders female offenders gravitate to those activities that are easily available, are within their skills, provide a satisfactory return and carry the fewest risks.' (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996: 478).

Little specialist know-how is necessary on the part of the mule. Although mule-recruiters might look for special qualities, in fact being involved with drugs or crime and having the know-how about criminal enterprise were neither necessary nor desired.

Although mules were engaged in other income generating activities, legal and illegal and these provided an alternative to mule work, forms of employment equivalent to mule-work are uncommon. Mule-work pays highly for a short but intense period of work for which no specialist skills are required. Unlike other forms of work or criminal engagement, this makes it possible as a once-off activity. It is this particular feature that makes it radically different (and in the eyes of some respondents more attractive) from other criminal or legal income generating strategies.

### **Making the decision in context: two case studies**

Many mules, like Frank, were offered mule-work in the form of an informal offer of work from which they were expected to gain reward. He saw his participation in drug trafficking as the result of a rationally weighing up of the potential benefits and risks.

JF: Did you think much before you made the decision? About the risk n everything?

Let's say, there's a slight risk to me, to my mind and at that time there was a big benefit. (Frank p.286)

Frank's was presented with an opportunity to work as a mule by someone that he knew, although not that well. The opportunity came with little attached obligation and he took time to weigh up the potential risks and benefits that he expected to gain for himself. His choices were to work as a mule or to stay in the situation he was in and perhaps improve his material circumstances. Frank's experience is the closest to a 'rational choice' of all mules: his decision making was individual, free from obligation and free from pressure from his contact.

Paula's experience sits at the opposite end of the scale. Paula went to Ecuador to learn Spanish. Her boyfriend helped her out by giving her a cut price ticket. It was only once she was there that working as a mule came up. The information that Paula was given before the day that she was supposed to leave was extremely partial: 'he told me before, a friend of mine is gonna come round from Colombia maybe for you to bring something home' (p.309). As a result of the rushed situation, the scope for serious, clear explanations of the work that she was about to undertake and the risks that she was undertaking was extremely limited:

JF: At what point did you find out that you were going to swallow the capsules?



P: While talking to my boyfriend and the guy was... You know... My Spanish wasn't all that good at all... but then they just kept on saying you know, it's safe, this way no one will ever find out, you just swallow them like medicine and all that so.. It was basically, it was already there like what were they gonna do with it...? So.

JF: So the way I imagine it is that you were talking with your boyfriend and then this guy comes round with the capsules all in the same day... and so, in a way it's already organised

P: Yeah, it was already organised... He told me before, a friend of mine is gonna come round from Colombia maybe for you to bring something home and then, you know within the conversation it came out that he was in danger and all that which probably before I hadn't talked about but you know one thing that hasn't changed: I accepted. It was like it came more from me. What can I do? If that's the only thing I can do I'm going to do it, you know... And he was like no, no, no... and I'm like OK let me do it! (Paula, 2006: p.298/299).

I interviewed Paula several times over a period of years about her involvement in drug trafficking as a mule and she has always maintained that it was her decision to swallow the capsules of drugs. Without negating her agency, there are several factors that severely limited the options for and her capacity for agential action in this situation. In short, although it might have been *her* choice, the situation was not of her choosing and it played an important role in constraining the extent to which she could choose. Although the factors listed above are most prominent in Paula's experience and account, these were relatively common in all other accounts of making the decision. Paula's study is illustrative of the chaotic and hurried way in which many mules made their decision on the basis of little information.

### **Narrating one's decision to work as a mule: agency, victim-hood and risk**

The offer to work as a mule was unexpected and unanticipated for most respondents. For most it was part of the emergent events of the day to day (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 972). In respondents' narratives however, making the decision was a key event. The way that the decision was narrated was further shaped by the narrative landscape of the prison. Public discourses of strategic victimisation which reverberated around prison contended that women 'had no choice'. This virtually eclipsed the possibility of mules making a decision to work as a mule.

Individual narratives contrasted this public narrative: as this chapter shows most respondents contended that they had made a decision, albeit in contexts not of their own choosing. Respondents highlighted the number of concerns they had to balance and the

limited choices they had. Interestingly, the way that these concerns were voiced was gendered: women highlighted connected concerns more than men. Although this probably reflected their lived experiences, it is important to remember that they may also have been a form of repair work and a subtle way to both take responsibility and deny it at the same time. At a personal level, taking responsibility for one's decision to work as a mule was an important aspect of coming to terms. Howard explained:

I do take responsibility because I said yes. No matter what: I said yes. No matter how you were threatened or how you were cajoled you said yes, so therefore it's yours, it's on your back. It's on you. My job now is to get this over with; my job is to fight at every level and every step and use intelligence to get this thing [sentence] done. [...] Now your job here is to commune this as quickly as possible, use the time positively! But to blame? Uh uh. That don't work because all it does it get you angry. (p.270).

Lastly, many women mules thought that they *had* made a mistake in agreeing to work as a mule. Whilst on one hand, this may have been a form of repair work incorporating religious standards of sinning and asking for forgiveness, at a more subtle level, narratives were underpinned by regret. Nonetheless, respondents also wanted to show that they had made the best decision that they could and were keen to show why and how they had made the decision. In rationalising their decision in this way, they strove to regain the agency they saw that they had lost.

### **Overview and discussion**

In this chapter I described the risks perceived by mules in order to examine how mules made a decision based on an assessment of perceived risks and benefits. This research has found that the decision to get involved is in itself, a process in which a multitude of factors are involved beyond making a calculation of costs and benefits. Although I initially set out to explore if and how respondents may engage in mule-work in ways which are purposeful and rational, mules' responses pushed me to consider what a purposeful and rational participation might look like.

The 'triad of agency' set out by Emirbayer and Mische is useful to elucidate different aspects of agency. All three elements were present in each account in differing balances:

### ***Projective***

All the mules saw themselves as agents of change towards a better future, whether it was to avoid immediate and apparent crisis or to bring about long term betterment.

### *Routine/habitual*

Respondents' will to bring about change navigated present circumstances and built upon existing 'habitual' practices and identities such as parent, partner, brother, daughter, granddaughter or drug dealer. As individuals situated at the intersections of multiple identities respondent's actions and solutions were nonetheless creative. Whilst motherhood might mean staying at home, the ethic of care could also be transposed to mean leaving to work as a mule<sup>66</sup>.

### *Practical evaluative*

This element has dominated this chapter as it did in respondents' experiences. Whilst identity was often unreflected upon and underpinned accounts, many mules engaged in explicit evaluations for the best outcome.

Lastly, I wish to highlight those aspects of mule's experiences, which offer a critique of both to contemporary 'rational choice perspectives'.

### **Connected rationality**

Although the rational choice perspective is clearly problematic, it is worthwhile discussing due to its pervasiveness in mainstream (malestream) understandings of why and how men become involved in crimes for profit and particularly organised crime and the drug market.

The last chapter demonstrated that although drug trafficking is indeed an economy; mules' motives are more diverse and complex than simply economic interests versus risks. In part, examining how women respondents chose to work as a mule offers a critique of the narrow view of the rational choice perspective: 'criminal motivations and involvements are also shaped by gender differences in risk preference and in styles of risk taking... women take greater risks to sustain relationships whereas males take the greater risks for reasons of status or competitive advantage' (Steffensmeier and Allen 1996: 468). This was evidenced in this research: women frequently mentioned relational concerns as motivating factors that outweighed the risks perceived. However, this was the case not only for women mules but

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<sup>66</sup> Sewell discusses the extension of such 'schemas' for action from one field to another as a way to enact agency (Sewell 1992).

also for men who worked as mules. Men responded to threats to those they cared for and also balanced out risks and benefits not only for themselves, but those around them.

Davies claims that the concept of ‘rationality’ is deeply rooted in ‘masculinist vocabularies’ of crime (2005: 63). She points out that both ‘rationality’ and the rational individual are concepts largely inherited from western moral philosophy which saw man and women, rational and irrational as dichotomous (2005: 254). In opposition to individualistic rationality, Davies observed that women shoplifters engaged in a form of connected rather than individualistic rationality in deciding to commit economic crime (Davies 2005: 14). This research expands on Davies findings to show that some men (and some but not all women) engaged in ‘connected rationality’.

In sum then, this research has prised open the space between the two poles of ‘rational choice’ (as free, individual choice) and victimisation (as coercion by men or social structures which serve to disempower women) to show much variation and overlap between these two poles. Respondents’ accounts described a variety of different ‘agencies’ which go between simplistic assumptions of the rational, individual ‘chooser’ and the naive, exploited victim-offender.

### **Informed consent**

It is worth reiterating that few mules (men or women) made their decisions based on full or accurate information. Some had only the barest idea of what they would be carrying, what exactly the work would entail, or the risks that mule-work poses. Some respondents were extremely street smart; others simply trusted the judgement of those they loved. Nonetheless, all based their ‘decision’ on partial information.

Rational choice perspectives acknowledge that people make choices on the basis of limited information (Cornish and Clarke 1986b; Norrie 1986)<sup>67</sup>. However, the lack of information available to mules in some cases begs the question of whether some respondents’ agreement to work as a mule could be judged as informed consent, especially where mules were coerced or threatened. However, even where coercion was not a factor, the extent to which mules are mis- or dis-informed about what they were going to do, what they were carrying and the quantity of drugs they were carrying has serious implications

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<sup>67</sup> Norrie criticises the rational choice perspective from the perspective of jurisprudence and criminal responsibility. He uses the terms ‘practical reasoning’ and ‘practical rationality’ (1986: 219) to reflect the social contexts in which decisions are made. He remains concerned with the individual and responsibility in the criminal justice setting. I have chosen not to use his terminology on this basis.

when mules are arrested particularly where sentences vary according to weight such as in the UK (Harper et al. 2000)<sup>68</sup>. This is further examined in Appendix 5.

Many contemporary accounts of drug trafficking continue to draw parallels with legal business. While this may be fruitful in some avenues of investigation and theorising, it is not a useful paradigm for understanding women drug mules (and perhaps male drug mules). Given the extent of mis- or dis-information which mules are given by contacts and the role of direct coercion or threat mules' 'recruitment' bears nothing in common with recruitment in the legal market.

### **Timing: catalysts to action**

Lastly, there were some elements of mule's recruitment which do not fit neatly into conceptions of structure or agency. Nonetheless, these 'forefronts of crime' were important. Emirbayer and Mische claim that an important aspect of agency is its temporality, or as an 'interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (1998: 970).

The timing of an offer of mule-work was crucial: when an offer of mule work was made played a large part in whether it was received as a meaningful strategy of action or not depending on current circumstances and concerns. Marta was asked to work as a mule previously:

When I was [home], smoking, this one guy, he was a dealer of mine, because from [home to next island] it's about 20 minutes, it's not far and [island 2] is where all the drugs are. It's all the crack cocaine... Jamaica and Holland is where it comes from right. And [name of boyfriend] was like, do a trip for me and I was like, 'you're fucking crazy, man! The day I do trafficking is the day I go with 20 kilos' because I'm not so stupid to do it, you know. It was always a joke, it was never something I wanted to do and then it just popped up. It popped up ridiculously. (p.168)

Frequently the important 'catalyst' towards action was an incidental event (or a 'changing historical event' to use Emirbayer and Mische's terminology). These included:

- a relative getting sick or requiring medical attention
- child growing up
- financial crisis
- partner leaving

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<sup>68</sup> In Ecuador there was an 'indulto' or pardon for all the mules who were arrested with 2 kilos or less in 2007 (Youngers 2008). Cruelly, one respondent was carrying an extra three kilos of heroin that he did not consent to and was not able to return home.

Such present situations feature in other research on why women become mules (Dorado 2005; Green 1991; Green 1998a; Sudbury 2005). These catalysts for action were not the product of social structures of gender; nonetheless gender played an important role in shaping how women imagined strategies and opportunities for dealing with them.

## **Conclusion**

The last three chapters have sought to answer the question: do women participate in mule-work willingly, as volunteers, or are they coerced: tricked, trapped or compelled, as victims. I found that agency here was individual (but connected to the concerns of others), was not a 'free choice' (but made in the limitations of social roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations) and was not 'rational' (as in rational choice) but it was not illogical either.

Ethnographic interviewing has been helpful to reveal getting involved as a process and understanding and interpreting how mules narrate their own agency in the context of prison. Degrees of victimisation and volition could be found in different accounts, however looking at mules' motives, how they were recruited and how they made the decision reveals different kinds of and layers of, both victimisation and volition.

Some mules were victims of impoverished circumstances which were worsened by being women (and compounded by sole responsibility for children). Importantly though, some women who were 'victims' of poverty were also agents of change. They positioned themselves as the key decision maker and took decisions which they hoped would bring about a positive change in circumstances for themselves and also those they care for. In contrast, some women did not come from disadvantaged backgrounds and did not experience poverty (for example Paula). Nonetheless she found herself in a difficult situation where she had to choose between tangible threat to her boyfriend or trafficking drugs. Despite the pressure she was under, she nonetheless sees the decision to work as a mule as her own decision. Lastly, some women appeared to make a free choice, under no pressure or obligation. Nonetheless, pervasive pressures and local norms about motherhood and desires to give children better chances also contributed to women's decisions to work as a drugs mule.

In conclusion then, it is difficult to say that women were victims, or volunteers in their recruitment. In most cases, women experienced both. Most importantly, being a victim did not preclude also being an agent.

## CHAPTER 9: MULE WORK BEGINS: TRAVELLING AND WAITING TO LEAVE

### Paula's story

Paula has been trying for an hour and a half but she has only managed to swallow twenty five of the capsules. Fifty more - each about the size of her little finger - lie on the table in front of her. It seems like an impossible task. An exhausted tear lands on the table which she quickly wipes away. She takes another sip of water, a deep breath and tries to choke back another Vaseline greased capsule. She coughs it back up the first few times, tries to open her throat like the man showed her but it's no good. After several painful attempts she finally manages to swallow it.

A Colombian man keeps one eye on Paula and the other on the cable TV. He continues to flick through the channels. He watches her from the bed with his shoes still on. He had impatiently explained it to her three times already, coated the capsule with Vaseline for her and mimed how to open her mouth wide and push it down her throat.

Almost every time it makes her gag. After the first few failed attempts she finally managed to swallow the first capsule. She was elated: it suddenly seemed possible. But now she feels tired, her belly sore, her head pounds. She shivers and rubs her sweaty palms together.

Half an hour later the Columbian starts to get anxious. He paces back and forth and looks at his watch. There are still 45 capsules on the desk.

\*\*\*\*

That morning Paula's boyfriend called and said to wait at her Hotel. He explained that his friend would bring the capsules to her and show her how to do it. It would be easy: like swallowing medicine. She thought it over. There wasn't much time; she decided she would do it. The man from Colombia arrived about three hours ago carrying a rucksack. She briefly wondered why it was so large. He tried to talk to her but she hardly spoke any Spanish. She mumbled something back that she hoped made sense. He shrugged his shoulders in reply.

Her boyfriend called from Europe and spoke to them both. After they talked, the contact opened his rucksack and took out several tins of fruit. He opened them and poured the liquid down the bathroom sink. He dried the capsules off and laid them out on the small desk in her hotel room.

He took out a tub of Vaseline, poured her a glass of water and explained how to swallow the capsules. She watched him but it was hard to listen. Her heart was beating too fast. There were so many and they were much larger than she had expected. It had sounded so easy yesterday. She checked her watch. She had to be at the airport in five and a half hours.

\*\*\*\*

JF: How much would you say the decision was yours? In a way...

Paula: Well, I would say I own 100% of it. I could have said no. It wasn't like anyone really forcing me.

[...]

It was too dangerous for me but it was the only possible solution to take my boyfriend out of danger because they had him... they were threatening his life. There was no way he could do it because they didn't trust him to let him do it, he might run away or something so I felt like there is no way I could get that much money. He owed a lot of money.

So, I was just like what's more important? I'm just going to do it. Kind of like a lesser evil. It wasn't like I pondered it for a couple of days and decided what I should do. No, I just... it was an impulse but it wasn't forced on me. It wasn't like I was just manipulated... Well in a sense yeah but... I still knew that eventually I was the one saying I'm gonna do it, you know.

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As the time to leave for the airport nears, the contact starts pacing the room. He tells her to get up and walk about to let the capsules settle better in her stomach. She is too tired to walk about and starts to cry. She prepares another capsule for swallowing and glances at her watch. She tries to force the capsule into her throat again but coughs and coughs.

Eventually, the contact comes and holds her throat open and pushes a capsule into her throat. He will continue like this until all the capsules have been swallowed. When he is finished Paula will have just under a kilo of cocaine in her stomach.

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Paula: I had the natural reaction like [the capsules are] really big and it's in your throat and I just kept coughing the capsules up until I got really, really tired and kind of frustrated with myself but once I said yes, I felt like I could not back down now.

[...]

JF: So, you could say there was pressure from yourself too?

Paula: Right, I was just like... I really *cannot* do it, you know. And I tell this guy and he's like no, you can, and it's safe and people do it all the time and I'm like *how?* And he's like no, try again...and OK...and he's telling me it was more in this time...it definitely wasn't...and he kind of opened my jaw and like really... like *pushed* it in. Basically...so that



it went through this barrier. By this time I was really exhausted and I could not feel in control because it was against my body.

JF: How did you feel when he was putting the capsules down your throat? Did you feel like he was helping you or somehow kind of violent?

Paula: It did feel kind of violent, you know, it's like your mind is one thing and your will... I guess... you make up your mind and it's one thing but then still, it violates natural ways of your system.

JF: So in a way you felt it was a conflict, your head saying I've got to do this, I've made a decision, but your body's reacting: this is not natural, this is not right. And then there's this other influence of this guy who's somehow doing some violence against your body. And your head also going but I have to do this...

Paula: Right. And also at some point... I really got to feel like... [...] I have no more strength, you know. I was exhausted and he forced it and I was trying so hard first myself and then eventually I couldn't force it down and just... I have no strength and he's like get up and walk around and I feel like: forget it! We will wait until I have to go to the airport, because I have no strength, I feel sick I need to rest, you don't really know what's going on.

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Paula: I felt like you know, the moment I made the decision, it was a crucial thing, you know, I have to say that actually I had to tell my boyfriend a couple of times this is really what I want to do it, not pressure but *I* want to, I know I should and... I guess if I just said whatever I'm going back home, whatever happens with will be, [and] then this guy [contact] would walk out the door and it would be over.

But also... It's something I know nothing about and I have to trust him. Whatever [the contact] has to do for this whole thing to get done for my boyfriend to be safe then... you know I said yes, ok *I give you control over me* because obviously they're going to use me and I don't know how to do it myself.

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At last the Colombian picks up her bag and puts her in a taxi to the airport. He puts her ticket and passport into her shaky hands and gives a bundle of notes to the driver.

Once she gets to the airport, her stomach aches and breathing is difficult. A policeman approaches her. She is pale and in pain. She is so scared that she tells him directly that she has swallowed drugs.

\*\*\*\*

*Paula swallowed 900g of cocaine and was sentenced for 8 years. At the time of this interview she had been out of prison for several months on parole and was working and studying.*

## **Introduction to chapters 9 and 10**

The next two chapters describe what it is like to work as a mule. Examining women's experiences of actually doing the job is important to advancing understanding of whether women were victims who unwillingly completed the task or did so under duress, or whether they were active participants in the job. Previous accounts of women mules have only explored how and why women get involved however this is only part of the picture. The next two chapters will address this gap in research. Chapter 9 examines leaving home, arriving and hanging out in Quito. Chapter 10 examines the explicit labour of mule-work: collecting, packing the drugs and preparing to leave. Since chapters 9 and 10 examine the same broad themes and theories, they are introduced together.

Existing research on mules offers some glimpses of what working as a mule entails. Zaitch provides a limited description of drug mules at work. He contends that mules are subject to control and manipulation by their contacts to ensure they complete the job. Such measures include not paying the mule until they have finished the job, claiming compensation from relatives should mules fail and pushing people to work as couriers again if they lose the drugs (2002: 148). Green describes mules from Nigeria as largely unaware of what they were carrying: 'some believed they had swallowed or were carrying gold or semi-precious gemstones in order to avoid customs duties for their suppliers.' (1991: 40). Huling describes one mule who was threatened by her contact with a gun when she tried to refuse to complete the task (1996: 50). Dorado's account is the most complete: she describes how mules were prepared for swallowing capsules of cocaine (Zaitch also offers a short description) and she also describes the process as slow, labour intensive and painful. Lastly, she also describes how, when it was time to swallow the capsules: 'more than one mule has changed their mind and tried to persuade the 'loader'<sup>69</sup> [person charged with helping the mule swallow the capsules] to cancel the trip. But it is too late and under all classes of threat they have to finish ingesting up to the last capsule.' (2005: 320). These brief descriptions of women doing mule-work by and large reproduce the characterisation of the mule as naive, unknowing, coerced and controlled in their labour. This is underpinned by an assumption that mules (particularly women's) involvement in the drug trade is passive, unknowing or the result of coercion.

Thus, the next two chapters explore how victimisation and agency are constituted in the context of mule-work. If mules are victimised by their contacts, how is this achieved? Do mules collaborate in their control, or do they resist or negotiate? The next two chapters

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<sup>69</sup> In Spanish: *cargador*.

will explore what it means to be an agent in the context of mule-work: how is agency enacted?; what makes action meaningful? Following Sewell's theory of structure, this research will explore what 'schemas' for action could be called upon by respondents; what resources were needed to enact agency and lastly who or what legitimated action as valid (Sewell 1992).

Mule-work is characterised by travel. This has implications for theorising actions as 'situated' since contemporary accounts of situated action have largely focused of local meanings in fixed geographic locales (Messerschmidt 1997; Miller 2002). This kind of 'mobility' is not well researched and as such this aspect of the next two chapters is largely exploratory. Nonetheless, this chapter will explore the possibility that social structures may not be limited by geographic space.

This chapter is based on data from men and women mules, from first-timers and professionals the chapter and is informed by conversations and interviews with men and women who recruited mules. It does not include data from those mules that were carrying drugs unknowingly.

### **Leaving home<sup>70</sup>**

After respondents agreed to work as a mule, their contacts quickly started to organise arrangements for travel. They bought aeroplane tickets, arranged travel documents and communicated with their contacts in Ecuador to ensure that the drugs would be ready for the mule. Although this process was similar for all mules, there was variety in how much control mules had over when they would begin their work as a mule. Donna's first trip as a mule was organised by a close friend. She had to travel immediately even though she wanted to postpone the trip:

The first time that I did it, I was scared. It was on my birthday. I had to leave on my birthday. I said to the guy I was working for, I go 'lets wait a week, I don't wanna go now... I wanna have my birthday party here with all of you not... (voice tails off) [but he said] 'Donna, I need it now, I need the money now, we need it now.' (Donna p.204).

Donna's close relationship with her contact provided an opportunity to discuss when she wanted to leave, however she was unsuccessful. He explained to her that he needed the

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<sup>70</sup> Some mules arrived in Quito under other pretences such as business, or education. Their experiences were different and will be described later.

money desperately; the trip had to be made immediately<sup>71</sup>. Donna dealt drugs for some time and had a keen awareness of the imperative of paying debts on time and the possible implications of not doing so. Despite having a privileged relationship with her contact and experience working in the drugs business (recruiting mules) there was little opportunity for her to negotiate leaving on her own terms.

In contrast, Amanda had no experience of working in the drugs business and knew her contact only vaguely. However she was able to negotiate when she would leave. She wanted to stay until Mother's day: her contact agreed.

This seems counterintuitive: it would seem logical that better resources (social contacts and experience<sup>72</sup>) would enable Donna to have more control over when she would leave. Nonetheless, there are a number of other factors at play that effect how much room there is for negotiation about when to make a trip. Looking at how mule-work is organised helps understand this apparent paradox.

Amanda approached her contact and asked to do a trip. Following this, her contact would have started planning for the drugs, contacts and mule to all meet in Quito. Organising this takes time (in some cases the cocaine would be first transported from Colombia or Peru also by mule). This created an opportunity for Amanda to negotiate some control over when she would leave. In Donna's case, it is likely that her contact had already made arrangements so the drugs may have been either waiting or on their way: once the drugs were in Quito and ready to go, the contact in Ecuador would have wanted to have the drugs for the least amount of time possible. Compounded with her contact's urgent need for money, there was little time/space within the trafficking structure for Donna to negotiate when she would leave.

Travel arrangements were organised quickly for most mules and the time between agreeing to make the trip and leaving was usually short. It is difficult to say to what extent this was intentional however an effect of the quick organisation of the trip was that mules had little chance to reconsider their decision. Although no respondents had second thoughts at this stage<sup>73</sup> data from mule-recruiters shows that some mules did successfully back out the verbal contract at this stage. Ryan (who recruited and sent mules) said that he had arranged for a relative of a friend to work for him as a mule. After the mule had agreed to do the trip

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<sup>71</sup> Although Donna did not explain why her contact had an urgent need for money there are a variety of plausible explanations: debts from drug dealing, being robbed, or another mule being arrested could all accrue debts with other traffickers.

<sup>72</sup> This analysis of 'resources' or capitals is influenced by Bourdieu's theory of capital (**Bourdieu, P.** 1986 'The forms of capital', in J. G. Richardson (ed) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, New York ; London: Greenwood Press.)

<sup>73</sup> Mules who had tried to back out at this stage and had backed out would not be in prison and therefore would not appear in this research.

he simply disappeared. Ryan thought he had possibly turned informant or was working for the police all along.

Bobby recruited and sent mules as part of his role in a small Latin American cartel. He explained that because mules sometimes changed their minds, they made sure that the mule knew very little to protect their organisation:

We only told them what we had to, up to a point, you know? Everyday things move forward a bit more. [...] There's a guy, they call him the 'father of the chickens', they call him that. He is the one who is in charge of finding passengers. If one passenger lets you down you complain to the 'father of the chickens' [...] and then this guy doesn't earn any money, because he makes money for each passenger that travels... so that's it, simply... it doesn't cause us problems at least.

The thing is that we were not the typical Colombian organisation that... There it's like... if you promised to travel, too bad: you travel. Because we already bought named tickets and everything is in your name. No, not us. We didn't go around armed, we didn't go around killing anyone, not anything like that... So, if you do not want to travel, OK, don't travel. Because equally, they don't know anything, so it will not have consequences for us. Problems, yes, but that's another thing... (Bobby p. 295, my translation)

This was echoed by respondents' experiences. At this stage, mules were given only rudimentary details of the specifics of their trip. They knew where they were going and for how long (not always accurately) but beyond that mules had very little information which could be problematic if the mule turned out to be an informant or police (for example names of who sent them and who they were going to meet). Even when they left home they usually had little more information than the name of a hotel they should check into. Some also had the number of the contact they should call once they arrived in Quito.

Aside from those few mules who were recruited by coercion, most mules left their country willingly. Most were busy making plans to leave and were filled with excitement, nerves and anticipation of travelling to a foreign country. Sharon is typical:

They didn't give me only the feeling of excitement, it like gave me this feeling of being in charge of something. I'm doing it, y'know, I'm actually going to do something dangerous... my God, the first day I got on the plane I was so excited. Woo! I'm telling you. Mixed emotions you know because it was my first time [out of the country and involved in drug traffic] so it didn't know how it was going to be like but I did it anyway.' (2003: 16)

Marta was accompanied to the airport by her contact. He took her shopping, checked her into a hotel, gave her spending money and made her feel comfortable. She had expected it would be like a 'cool free holiday'; this part of the journey fulfilled those expectations:

He [her contact who arranged everything] picked me up, bought new clothes, shoes, everything. He left me in the hotel and gave me cash and said here, go to the airport and off you go. So I thought it was pretty good. (Marta p.219)

Although most mules claim that they had not anticipated getting arrested, many also talked about leaving in a way that belied this confidence. Many left with a sense of hesitancy; some remember their goodbyes as particularly poignant:

I got *fucked up* that night. That night oh... 'cause I couldn't get on the plane unless I has high and I was drunk cause I'm afraid of planes. So, you know n I left the money with my mom n I brought 200 dollars, like I told you [...] and um, I told my mother you know, I'm going on vacation (half laughing) and she's like 'what are you talking about your going on vacation'?! I'm like 'yeah' and she's like [nickname] what are you up to? N I'm like, don't worry about it mom, just pray that if I come back all our problems'll be solved. N my sister and her husband, they didn't like the idea, my brother started crying cause I took them all one by one to reassure them to take care of my fam... my kids. (Amanda p. 84)

Although Amanda told her family she was going abroad, most women told their family that they had to go to visit another part of the country for work or another reason. Those who had children usually left them in the care of the extended family. Bonny left her daughter in the care of her contact and his family: her contact was the brother of a close friend.

In spite of the sadness of leaving the family and fear (of aeroplanes, getting caught and so on), Amanda was also looking forward to having a holiday; she was also filled with excitement about travelling and in particular 'being' someone else for a time:

I was like happy, I felt like I was a person that travels, I was alone, I didn't have no responsibilities, something I always wanted to feel I guess. I was thinking selfish at the time.

JF: And so it was more like a thought for that moment for the small thing it could offer you?

Hmm mm.

JF: And not really seeing past that?

Right, I just, you know... I'm getting on a plane. I'm leaving (home) and I'm gonna go to Ecuador. And I'm gonna go to Ecuador live it to the fullest. (190)

All expected to return soon: most trips were planned to last between about 5 days and 2 weeks. Since most were travelling as 'tourists', they had to stay long enough to avoid arousing suspicion.

Although the contact organised the necessary documents for travel: tickets and passports where necessary, mules prepared to leave independently. None were coerced into leaving. The working relationship between the mule and the contact can be described as one of collaboration rather than coercion at this stage.

## **Travelling**

Travelling was not a significant part of mules' narratives in itself. The above descriptions about leaving home and travelling sum up what emerged from interviews about leaving home and travelling. Nonetheless, getting on the plane was significant. Although respondents were not aware of it at the time, travelling marked the entry to working as a mule. The verbal contact became truly binding once mules started the trip. The verbal contract will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Arriving**

Mules were given instructions by their contact of what to do when they arrived. Although Bonny was met at the airport, the rest travelled alone to a pre-arranged hotel or found their own accommodation. The next important task was to communicate with their original contacts at home and sometimes also their new contact in Ecuador. Manuela's experience was typical:

I heard from my boyfriend that I must call him to know what to do [once I arrived]. I was staying in Quito for a few days then I was sent to Guayaquil<sup>74</sup>. I was told which hotel to go to. They were telling me all this by telephone. Every time I went anywhere I had to call. That's how I got the number for the contacts to call in Ecuador. (Manuela 230).

This was very similar to an account from an experienced mule who had made multiple trips all over the world:

JF: how does it work when you arrive?

First you call them by phone, before you leave, they give you a number. You have to hide it or memorise it. When you arrive you call, or sometimes when you arrive you call back. (Catalina, p. 157)

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<sup>74</sup> Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city and has Ecuador's only other international airport.

At this stage mules were responsible for keeping in touch with their first contact. Many left home with only a small amount of money given to them to pay for their accommodation and collaborated with their contacts to make sure that they had a place to stay. In sum, mules largely collaborated with their contacts unthinkingly: they had everything to gain by staying where they were told and checking in with their contacts and nothing to gain by doing anything else.

During the primary stages of mule-work (leaving home and arriving in Ecuador) mules were subject to little supervision and often collaborated with their initial contacts. For most, the draw of travel and a free holiday was enough of a 'pull' to come to Ecuador without the need for any supervision or cajoling from contacts.

The degree of cooperation at these early stages possibly resulted from mules' excitement about going on holiday. Although some were already thinking that they were 'working' at this stage others thought that work did not begin until the last couple of days when they collected the drugs and prepared to fly.

### **On holiday in Quito: free time and supervision**

When mules were recruited they were told they would have a 'holiday' before they would work as a mule. Experiences of the 'holiday' were diverse: some mules were heavily supervised and had little free time; others did not meet their contacts until shortly before they were due to leave and most of the time in Quito alone. Some spent most of the 'holiday' staring at the wall of their hotel room; others spent some time exploring the city and further afield. Being supervised and having a holiday were not necessarily mutually exclusive however. On Donna's first trip as a mule she was met from the airport by her contact who was friendly, celebrated her birthday with her and made sure she had a good holiday:

The next day was my birthday, he brought me a bottle of champagne and another friend of his and I didn't have to feel alone. Cause my friend told him please take care of her, it's her birthday and she's *really pissed off* with me right now (laughs). He goes 'please take care of her. Please make sure she has fun and then put the drugs on her, whatever, but make her have a nice week of vacation and I had a good time. I travelled a lot. He made me travel. I ate well, I slept well. (Donna p.204)

Although Donna was in the company of her contact during the holiday, some mules did not meet their contact until a day or so before they were due to leave. This left considerable time for hanging out in Quito, enjoying free time and the excitement of being a tourist:



I went to the spot [bar] (laughs), I went to exercise room... I went to Galapagos and I drank wine, I looked at the view, you know, I tried to block out of my mind that I was there to commit a crime. (Amanda 189/9)

Although this period of time waiting could be filled with holiday activities and distractions, it could also bring time for reflection:

I was wandering around by myself to see the city, to don't think too much because every time when I was in the hotel I was only thinking, thinking. I felt me so confused in this time. (Marina p.98/99).

Most mules were met by their contacts and were subject to some form of supervision and control during their 'holiday'. The day after arriving, Frank was met in his hotel by his contact:

So the contact wanted to see my passport to confirm who I was etc. I gave him a copy [of my passport], I had a copy in my pocket then went to [money transfer service] n got the money. A few days later the contact comes again and asks me to go out for a meal. OK. He had some money cause we weren't using the [money transfer service] anymore and at the time I found out that there was an antinarcotics police conference on at the same hotel I was staying at [wry chuckle].

At the hotel they had 2 for 1 cocktails during happy hour but they extended it for me. I was putting this on the hotel bill n was running out of money almost. I was paying every other day because they only gave me money in small amounts. I met the contact, asked for money; I said I needed at least x to pay for the rest of the stay. I would go out at about 6 or 7 am and walk about then I'd come back for breakfast, [...]. I got friendly with the security guard because of the police convention n we'd go out drinking together and to a few clubs etc. I didn't leave [town], I just got to know the town well. (Frank p.276/7).

I probed Frank about how he saw his contact:

JF: How much did you feel that you were in control of what you were doing rather than being controlled?

I was being controlled; mainly through the money situation. This fellow would run up and I'd go n see him and get enough to last a couple of days. I was controlled money-wise. (p.286)

Although this control was implicit, Frank understood clearly that he was dependent on his contact for money and that his contact was using this to make sure that he did not go far. Although Frank collaborated with his contact (and was able to enjoy his holiday while doing so), his reliance on his contact for material necessities left little space for alternative actions. Control was also explicit: Frank's contact also asked for a copy of his passport which he provided on request.

Although Frank was indifferent about being controlled, other mules resisted their contacts' efforts to control or limit their movements:

I came in to Ecuador [...] in the evening. I went straight to my hotel. I was told not to come out. Uh! No fucking way! I'm in a different country. I love travelling. With [my work] I've always travelled. I love travelling. So I'm like no, fuck this, I'm gonna go n find something to eat. I don't eat plain food and I wanna go get a bottle, you know... I mean, shit I can't smoke anything, I don't know where to get weed so I'm gonna get something to drink, chill out in my room. What are you gonna do? Sit sober in your fucking room watching TV? How boring! You know.

So, I'm like alright, I walk down the road. On my way up this guy calls me and he's like calling me in English. I'm like, my God you speak English? And he's like yeah, I'm [contact name]. I'm like ok.... oh! You're [contact]! He's like yeah. Go back to your room I'm coming up. This was the guy; he had to meet me in the hotel. He's like why did you come out of the hotel? I'm like 'because I was fucking hungry, dude, what do you think I'm gonna sit n wait for you all day n starve?' Fuck that shit. So I went back to the hotel. He said to me, 'you know, you shouldn't be coming out, n I'm like 'well I'm not going to sit in this hotel all day, I'm here on vacation n I'm gonna fucking enjoy it'! So he's like 'OK'... (Marta p.172).

Frank and Marta had both travelled widely and both wanted to make the most of the holiday they had been anticipating: in particular the chance to eat, drink and relax. Whilst Frank saw liaising with the contact as reasonable and advantageous, Marta saw his demand that she stay in the hotel as inconsistent with both her idea of a holiday, the requirements of the job and what she had been promised by her contact.

Although her contact told her that she had to stay in the hotel, she saw no reason to do so, nor any force requiring that she follow his instructions. Furthermore, Marta knew her initial contact well, had a history of international travel as well as hanging out in the 'ghetto' and had no reservations about doing what she chose in what she saw as her time. After that, her contact did not ask her to stay in the hotel again and did what he could to help her enjoy her holiday:

So I went walking around during the day n everything, he came to visit me on the Friday. I was here 2 days, ok, and he says to me that he's going to the coast, or I don't know where, but he's going away for the weekend to go get the drugs, do I want anything. So I'm like yeah, I want some marijuana, so he bought me some marijuana, he bought me some wrappers [rolling papers] and... that was it... (Marta p.172).

Sewell claims that extending schemas from one setting to another is a way of enacting agency (1992). Here the 'schema' of being a tourist provided her with meaningful action (and resistance). In order to enact this schema she used her body (the most available resource) to simply leave the hotel. However, her action was backed by social capital

borrowed from her partner. Where other mules might have been scared to take the chance of angering their contacts (whom they saw as potentially violent), Marta had the backing of her contact who was a friend of her partner. Furthermore, she was not threatened by her contact simply because he was a 'trafficker': her partner was also a trafficker.

Some mules did stay in their hotel as requested. Mandalina had worked as a mule-watcher before (following mules to watch them in case they tried to abscond). She said it was easy and like a free holiday. However when she was working as a mule she rarely left the hotel without her contact's supervision. In contrast to Marta, she had little money to go anywhere and spoke no Spanish and only a little English at this time:

[The contact] would come and take me to go and eat. Then I rested, then in the evening he would come and get me again. He was always with me because the hotel was locked up at night, you cannot go out. They didn't want me to know anyone here. (Mandalina p.240)

Mandalina only went out with her contact. The rest of the time she stayed in her hotel. She thought this was boring but complied partly because she did not see resistance as meaningful or useful. Her experience as a mule-watcher previously may also have shaped her expectations of the job. Unlike Marta, she did not know her contact (he was a customer in the bar she worked at) and had no 'social capital' to call on. Elsewhere, Mandalina said that she did not want to anger her contact: she assumed that if he was in drug trafficking he may also be violent.

It was not only first time mules that were supervised in this manner. Angela (an experienced mule) was also subject to similar kinds of control:

Like if you stay in a hotel, you stay. Only if they come to fetch you then you can go out. Like for me I was respecting their rules. The room service people, they talk to them, they know exactly what to bring you.' (Angela 2003, p.21).

Angela did not mind being asked what to do since she was asked 'in a nice way' by her contacts. The relationship between contacts and mules will be examined in the next chapter. How much mules were supervised had little correlation with how experienced they were. On Donna's second trip she found herself totally alone. Despite speaking Spanish she found Quito intimidating. Angela was an experienced mule who had travelled to many different countries. She explained:

Imagine you go to a black country and only you [are] white and you do get scared so it's a little bit danger for you so you don't go out. Like in Brazil, I don't understand what they saying because they're speaking another language so what'm I going to do

outside because I don't understand. In Australia, was nice because they speak English, In Pakistan they speak mostly half, half English but they speak Punjabi – but I understand because I had a Punjabi friend for years and I was wearing their clothes so they respect me.' (Angela 2003: 21).

Most mules stayed in an area of Quito called La Mariscal. It is a tourist area: there are a large concentration of restaurants, clubs, tour agencies bars and cafes. Spanish is spoken everywhere and English is a close second (followed by German and French). There was also a high concentration of crime in the district: a street over from the main tourist drug was 'Amazonas Avenue' which was the main locale for drug dealers at night (selling cocaine to tourists and *basuco* to locals). In addition, there was also a heavy police presence in the area. It is understandable that the heady combination of police, beggars, tourists and drug dealers could seem intimidating to someone who speaks neither English nor Spanish.

Arriving in Quito was an anti-climax for most mules. After the initial excitement about visiting a foreign country, they found themselves without language, much spare cash or any idea of what to do. Although experience of travelling, hanging out with trafficker-boyfriends and acting fearlessly were all resources that some mules used to negotiate how they spent their time, Angela's experience shows that the environment also played an important role in shaping how mules felt about and negotiated their surroundings.

### **Travel: Quito as a 'hub' of globalised population flows**

Quito is an important international hub. The majority of foreigners visiting Quito are tourists of all ages, backpackers, gap year volunteers and college students attending University in Quito for a term<sup>75</sup>. A large number of foreigners pass through every year taking advantage of the hotels, bars and tours that the bustling tourist centre has to offer. Many tourists, traders and longer term residents come from North America and Europe: many of them are white<sup>76</sup>. International trade also attracts a significant population of international workers (oil, dealers in arts and crafts as well as international professionals working for international NGO's).

Some mules were a part of larger patterns of population flows to Quito from the rest of the world for legitimate (temporary) immigration. Howard, Paula and Caroline were all in

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<sup>75</sup> Ecuador has an extremely large ex-migrant population; both to Spain and to North America. This also makes up an important part of the wider picture of international population flows. However, it should be noted that this research primarily concerns those foreigners who came to Ecuador and left with drugs (rather than those Latin American couriers who came from Ecuador to the rest of the world). The rationale for this has been discussed in the methods chapter.

<sup>76</sup> Quito also has international immigrants from all over the world: China, Japan the Middle East and other parts of Latin America. La Mariscal was however, visibly white.

Quito before they got involved in working as a mule. Caroline came to Ecuador for the first time as an exchange student while she was at High School to learn Spanish. She met her husband (who was also a foreigner) in Ecuador. She returned to be with him. Paula also came to learn Spanish: I described in an earlier chapter that her ticket was bought for her by her boyfriend. Lastly, Howard had a long history of coming to Latin America: in the 1970's and 80's he was working in the music industry. He had continued to visit Latin America since he had family connections; he was also dealing in art. Furthermore, mules were part of the same population flows as tourists and used the same material physical routes and pathways: aeroplanes, hotels, money transfer services and so on.

In chapter one I proposed that drug trafficking be conceptualised as a social 'scape' comprised by flows of people. Here, the flows of tourism and drug trafficking overlap: globalisation makes possible mules transport to Quito, as well as legitimating their presence. In order for mules to 'pass' they had to embed themselves in the schemas for legitimate action created by the flow of tourists to Quito. Being a 'tourist' provided not only schemas for action (as Marta demonstrated) but also resources for enacting action and agency.

### **Acting like a tourist**

Most mules were in Quito for a short period of time. Being foreign is a key resource for passing in this milieu. Although being visibly foreign (and particularly being white) was a useful resource, successfully passing as a tourist could be achieved in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, appearing to travel as a tourist is not the same as being a tourist. Catalina had travelled widely as a professional mule. On her first trip she had never been a tourist outside of her own country before:

JF: Did these guys give you any advice?

It's not advice. They're training you. Like I told you before, how to react if the police is around you, or if you're tired, don't go to expensive hotels, to go to touristic [sic] places and not just for shopping. As a tourist you have to do tourist things but not just for shopping. Well, shopping yeah, but with your own money. And not to spend the whole day in the hotel. Go out and visit places. (Catalina p.157).

Although some mules were encouraged to take a holiday (one mule was even sent to the Galapagos Islands for a couple of nights) for the overwhelming majority the 'holiday' was paradoxical. Although many mules were travelling under the guise of tourism, few mules had the chance to travel like tourists.

Catalina loved to travel: experiencing new cultures and doing some shopping were two of the aspects of mule-work she valued the most. While she was working away from home, she travelled freely and autonomously. In spite of this freedom, working as a mule was isolating:

[It's] very lonely. You have to be on your wits, if you like meet tourists; they ask where you're from. I was travelling on a false passport so you must be careful about what you're saying etc. (Catalina, p.226).

Even though the 'holiday' was anticipated as exciting, for many respondents it was often underpinned by feelings of insecurity and fear. Although it is difficult to say if it was intentional, some mules' sense of paranoia and insecurity was worsened by their contacts' actions – particularly being asked to change their hotel (which was common). Aside from the explicit practical function of breaking any 'line of detection' and to avoid hotel staff seeing a second suitcase arrive, this also unsettled mules, it also made clear the hierarchical relationship between contact and mule. The contact claimed to have expert information that the mule didn't have access to: the mule therefore had to comply with these instructions. Graham found it disorientating:

JF: How much control do you think you had on this trip?

I did feel that I pretty much had everything in control until I got here. When I got here... the first day I felt I had it under control, the second day – when they came to pick me up to tell me to change hotel cause the one I was in was too expensive that's when I felt, alright, I'm starting to lose control. (Graham, p. 191).

Like Marta he was 'streetwise' and used to thinking on his feet. In his words, when he was working in the street: 'I could see where my exits were' (p. 192). Although being in a new context was disorientating in itself, being moved by his contacts made it difficult for him to keep an eye on his 'exits'.

In sum then, although mules travelled and stayed in Quito under the guise of being a tourist, few mules had a 'holiday'. Although a minority were able to enjoy hanging out, drinking and going to tourist attractions and put the purpose of the trip to the back of their minds, for many mules the time waiting bore little resemblance to a holiday. In the case of some mules, the 'holiday' meant staying in the hotel, not leaving and not speaking to anyone except their contacts. The rationale for this will be discussed next.

## **Mule-recruiters on mules on holiday**

Mules were largely unaware of the information that follows; either while they were in Quito or when I interviewed them in prison. Data from those who recruit and send mules goes some way to understanding the larger structures and practices at work.

Transporting drugs by mule involves a significant upfront investment. Minimally this can be around \$10,000<sup>77</sup>. Popular accounts of mules in the printed media and in films have described mules sent in groups (Carvel 1990; Marston 2005) as dispensable, 'kamikaze' couriers (Green 1998: 103). However for small to medium sized organisations, sending a mule was a significant investment of resources (money, effort and time) by those involved (see also Zaitch 2002: 156). Losing a mule could represent a significant loss for a small organisation. By the time mules arrived in Ecuador, a significant investment had already been made which contacts guarded:

I see mules as the weak factor in it all. If they get caught they're going to talk. As far as I'm aware none of ours have talked. And mules are expensive. (Ryan p. 23).

Employing a mule was a risky business. It usually meant recruiting someone from outside the organisation although they might be connected through social ties (as I described in chapter 6). Nonetheless the mules' reliability in the drugs business (potentially under pressure) was usually untested and therefore potentially unreliable.

Should a mule abscond, investors would lose key resources: the mule's body and potentially information about their trafficking organisation. These two resources – information and bodies are intricately tied into hierarchical relationships of power. To establish control of mules, contacts sought control over these key resources<sup>78</sup>.

### *Information*

Mules had very little information about what they were doing (this was described earlier in chapter 8). This lack of understanding about what was going on (who their contacts were, where the drugs were coming from, how much they would be carrying) continued

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<sup>77</sup> I based this figure on information collated from different respondents who sent mules. The basis of this calculation is: \$2000 a kilo of cocaine (most mules carried around 2 kilos), plus packaging fees (which varies according to the method of concealment employed from), possibly a fee for the contact in Ecuador, plane tickets, documentation and any upfront payment for the mule.

<sup>78</sup> This analysis is guided by Foucault's theory of domination (as related by Garland 1990). He contends that Foucault's theory of domination is based on three major and related concepts: power, knowledge and the body (p.137). This will be further developed in the next chapter. There is not enough space in this thesis however to fully discuss the relevance of Foucault's theory of domination in relation to the relationship between contacts and mules.

while they were in Quito: as Bobby explained above mules were told only what their contacts needed them to know.

Although contacts saw this as something they did to reduce the risk to them if mules absconded, it also served to create hierarchies of dependence and power. In short, contacts hold all the information and therefore much of the power. Mules were almost entirely dependent on their contacts to give them information about what they had to do for their work and to protect them from risks posed by the police and so on (for example by moving them to a different hotel if the one they were staying in seemed to pose a risk).

### *Bodies*

Once mules began their journey, their body became a commodity in the business. It was guarded: sometimes remotely though making sure mules did not have the money or resources to leave and sometimes directly by demanding that mules stayed in their hotel. Although mules' (bodily) compliance was sometimes achieved through explicit control, it was also achieved through the mules' collaboration and compliance with contacts' requests. Some mules reported that they hoped to make many more trips after the initial one and therefore they would have been keen to show their prospective long term employers that they worked well by following orders closely. In doing so they willingly accepted their status at the bottom of the hierarchy: they allowed their bodies to become subject to contacts' demands for control. Although the body was the site of contacts' operation of power over the mule, it was also a resource for resistance by the mule.

In sum, information and bodies were key resources for control, collaboration, compliance and resistance. Although contacts sometimes explicitly sought to use these to control mules (as part of a strategy to limit risks), mules often collaborated with their contacts, using the same resources: for example mules used their bodies to demonstrate their willing collaboration and also gave relevant information to their contacts (for example Frank gave his contact a copy of his passport when he first met him). Nonetheless, it is important to note that mules were dependent on their contacts for a variety of necessities including food, money, information and security.

### **Conclusion: schemas, structures, resources and agency**

Several themes have emerged in this chapter which will be developed further in the next chapter. The first finding is that contrary to contemporary accounts which have largely described mules' participation as passive, there was some diversity in the experiences of



mules. Although some mules participated unwillingly, they did not do so entirely passively: Marina travelled alone and patiently kept a low profile while she was waiting to do the job: in short she complied of her own accord. Other mules collaborated with their contacts' efforts to control them: handing over details about themselves, attending regular meetings and sometimes not even leaving the hotel when it was requested. Their actions at this stage can be seen as a form of collaboration. Nonetheless, few mules had the resources to do anything other than collaborate since they were in a relationship of dependence with their contacts. Lastly, some mules actively resisted their contacts attempts to control them: Marta was the most 'resistant': she had been promised a holiday and fought with her contact about this, however after an initial period of conflict, he backed off and they settled into a relationship of collaboration.

Importantly though, at this stage all mules still wanted to go through with the job: they were reliant on their contacts to do this, so had good reasons to collaborate and comply with contacts' requests. Since some mules wanted this to be the first trip of many, they may have been keen to show themselves as good workers. Furthermore, doing what you are asked to by employers (who are paying for hotels, food and so on) is something that had much in common with legal forms of work and therefore respondents' experiences of working. This could be interpreted as evidence of another 'schema' though which mules interpreted their contacts requests and their subsequent actions.

It is useful at this stage to categorise mules' actions using Emirbayer and Mische's 'triad of agency' (1998).

*Habitual:* In employing identities that existed before they worked as a mule, their actions can be considered habitual: for example as a tourist or as a worker.

*Projective:* Mules actions' were directed towards various aims: having a holiday, demonstrating they were good workers, avoiding conflict and receiving what they needed from contacts.

*Practical/evaluative:* Some, but not all, mules engaged in evaluation about their actions. Although Marta reflected on her choices and made a decision appropriately, many mules did not practically evaluate their options. Often the circumstance was manipulated so that they had little resources for action (for example Mandalina did not see that it was possible to leave her hotel alone).

### *Globalisation and social structures*

The most important finding theoretically at this stage was about the social structures that mules were working within. Connell uses the term 'structural inventory' to describe how to recognise social structures (1986). In the circumstances above what structures were mules within, under or reproducing?

Before mules left they were given little instructions about what was to happen. In lieu of more specific information, mules called upon schemas for action. Work was an important schema – doing as you are told, as was being a tourist. However, these were not mutually exclusive. These schemas were both brought by mules to Ecuador. However, mules were also still operating within structures from which they began their journeys: they were still mothers, daughters and partners with all the obligations and duties that were discussed in earlier chapters. Accordingly the coercion which built on these responsibilities still held fast: Marina did not want to back out even though she was scared. Marta could still borrow social capital from her partner even though she was several thousand miles away from him. Thus, structures do indeed seem appear to be 'virtual' as Sewell contends (1992). Furthermore, Sewell contends that for schemas to be enacted, the agent requires resources (which he claims are material). As I described above here, mules relied on their bodies to 'do' action (whether it was compliance or resistance): this was one (material) resource which travelled with mules. Lastly, Sewell contends that for social action to be received as legitimate it must have an audience. The 'audience' in mules' accounts of their trip so far were both their contact, but audiences were also imaginary: their original contacts and partners as well.

Thus, when mules are engaging in 'situated action', they engage in their local circumstances (primarily the relationship with their contact) but also with structures which they brought with them and reproduced through their actions: these included elements of identity and experience.

### *Contacts' control of mules*

Contacts sought to control mules in ways that limited their resources and options for agency. Control was sometimes physical and present, however control was often 'virtual', operating from far away. These have been described above and included coercion. This will be developed in the next chapter.

## *Narratives*

Respondents' descriptions of being a mule were inevitably linked to their identities in prison and were shaped by the narrative landscape. However, unlike their motives (sometimes justifications) for working as a mule, few respondents had been asked about their experiences as a mule before. Thus, in some senses this part of the story was less carefully storied than narratives about respondents' motives. Whilst motives sometimes 'chimed' with prison discourses about their experiences (and sometimes other mules stories) there was less in common between how stories were told. Nonetheless, interview data about respondents' experiences of working as a mule cannot simply be considered a transparent truth about their experiences either.

It was very difficult for male mules to speak about feeling frightened or out of control. Similarly, in the women's prison, expectations and public narratives made it difficult for women to talk about enjoying being a mule and feeling in control since these both run contrary to recognisable public stories in both prisons. Nonetheless, these did emerge in interviews. Nonetheless, the way that respondents narrated their experiences of working as a mule were undoubtedly tied up with their identity: not only in the present but also in the past, for example, some respondents revealed themselves as adventurous, daring, independent and tough. Others showed themselves to be fearful, intimidated by their contacts and only passively involved in what they did once they arrived in Ecuador. Overall though, examining the first part of mule-work (leaving, travelling and the 'holiday') starts to reveal a picture of heterogeneity and complexity. Although some mules were subject to considerable coercive control and had little opportunity for action, others collaborated with contacts and occasionally were able to resist control. Coercion, collaboration and control will be examined further in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 10: MULE-WORK: DOING THE JOB

## **Introduction**

This is the second of two chapters which examine the work done by drug mules. This chapter follows respondents as they collect and pack the drugs and prepare to go to the airport; the second part of this chapter examines what happened when mules tried to back out of the verbal contract to work as a mule. I also examine the relationships between mules and their contacts throughout this period of work.

This chapter develops theoretical concerns which emerged in the last chapter. As in the last chapter, I explore how victimisation and agency are constituted in mule-work; what mule-work is like and will ask if mules were passive or active participants in their work. In order to answer this, I first examine how the job of mule-work was organised to understand what constitutes action in this context. Next, I explore the role that gender had in mule-work and will explore if and how the work of the mule was shaped by gender, and if and how gender and victimisation were related.

As in the last chapter, I conclude that mules' experiences were diverse and were marked by a mix of collaboration, negotiation and resistance. Nonetheless, I also found that once mules had travelled to Ecuador, it was almost impossible to back out of the verbal contract.

## **Working with contacts in Ecuador**

Collecting and loading the drugs necessitated that mules and contacts spent time together. When mules arrived in Ecuador, mules usually had one only contact who would meet them, give them money to live, perhaps take them out to eat and so on (this was covered in the last chapter). However sometimes mules were minded by a couple of people: not only contacts but also specialists who assisted with packing the drugs, training the mule to swallow capsules or measuring them for clothes in which drugs would be concealed. Although many mules acquainted with their initial contact (who recruited them into mule-work) the relationship between mule and the secondary contact in Ecuador was marked by unfamiliarity and distance

## **Methods of smuggling**

Drugs were smuggled using a variety of methods:

	Drug	Weight <sup>79</sup> (kilos)	Method of concealment
Bonny	Cocaine	6.5	Suitcase lining and packed into shoes inside the suitcase
Amanda	Heroin	6	Suitcase lining
Howard	Cocaine	2	Package inside the suitcase
	and heroin	3 (5 total)	
Anika	Cocaine	5	Compressed and packed into paintings
Catalina	Cocaine	3.3	Packages of souvenirs, arts and crafts inside the suitcase
Manuela	Cocaine	2.5	Packed in underwear (pants)
Mandalina	Cocaine	1.5	Swallowed capsules
Marina	Cocaine	2	Suitcase lining
Sharon	Cocaine	2	Packed into underwear (bra)
Tanya	Cocaine	2	Packed in a briefcase inside the suitcase
Graham	Cocaine	2	Suitcase lining
Frank	Cocaine	2.5	Taped to body; packed into carton of wine.
Angela	Cocaine	2	In her clothes
Michael	Cocaine	2	Suitcase lining
Donna	Heroin	1.5	Distributed in underwear, shoes, clothes etc.
Marta	Cocaine	1	Packed in underwear (bra)
Lorenzo	Cocaine	1	Swallowed capsules
Caroline	Heroin	1	Swallowed capsules
Paula	Cocaine	0.9	Swallowed capsules

*Methods of concealment, weight and drug*

Examining the way which labour was organised is a way to understand the ‘regime’ and local power dynamics: ‘the current labour practice gets embodied in technology designed with given social arrangements in mind, among them the sexual division of labour’ (Connell 1987: 102). Although Connell is most concerned with the sexual division of labour, the ways and technologies in which mules operate are indicative of regimes of domination and power more broadly in the way that mule-work was organised. There was some important variation between methods of concealment. Each will now be examined in turn.

### **Drugs in luggage and packages**

Around half of the mules in this research were carrying drugs concealed in luggage: either in double lined or false bottomed suitcases or concealed in objects which they carried in their bags. Cocaine and heroin were packed inside a number of objects: cartons of wine, compressed into souvenirs, paintings, shoes and inside a briefcase<sup>80</sup>. The drugs were always packaged before the mule received them.

<sup>79</sup> The actual drug and weight frequently differs to what mules were told. Only where mules were arrested were they able to find out what and how much they were actually carrying. Where mules made many trips, the data tabulated here is from their last trip on which they were arrested.

<sup>80</sup> Independent and small scale carriers also reported packaging drugs in a variety of similar ways: compressed into mechanical parts, loose in a talcum powder bottle, the soles of shoes and compressed into drilled out parts of wooden objects, particularly souvenirs.

The handover was usually organised entirely by the contact. The contact usually took the suitcase to the mule at their hotel. They would either take the bag directly to the mule in their room or they would check into another room (with the suitcase) to avoid arousing suspicion. Mules did not have to do anything except wait for their contacts.

The handover of the package was usually arranged to 'design out' opportunities for either the mule or the contact to rob the drugs and blame it on the other. Ryan claimed he once lost \$30,000 as a result of a fumbled handover: he could never work out whether the mule or his contact absconded with the drugs. Following this he always spoke to both the mule and the contact on the phone while the handover took place or he would give the drugs to the mule himself.

One exception was Frank who collected the drugs himself following his contacts' instructions:

I got a taxi to a big church and then I picked up the drugs there, it was in 2 cartons of wine. Chilean. So I didn't know what or how much was inside. Then [initial contact] rang and gave me the address of where to drop off the packages in [destination point; not Frank's home country]. (Frank p.277)

Mules all received the drugs pre-packaged. This ensured that the mule could not steal a portion of the drugs. It also serves to ensure that mules had very little information about what or how much they were carrying. Importantly, carrying drugs in a package required little involvement from the mule. Mules who were coerced all carried packages since this method required the least action from the mule. In one case the mule refused to touch the suitcase: her contacts packed it for her and threw out her suitcase.

Packing drugs in suitcases is a relatively gender neutral method of transportation. Although what was packed inside could 'gender' the suitcase, the bag itself could be (pre-) prepared for a man or a woman. Similarly, women were often carrying drugs packed into objects: paintings and souvenirs which could equally have been typical in a man's or a woman's suitcase.

Suitcases (and objects) were often customised and packed with drugs by a specialist: Stefan commented that this skill could command a high price: 'you pay what it's worth for a well made suitcase' (p.56). He claimed that his supplier guaranteed that his bags could pass sniffer dogs and could even be drilled without leaking powder.

Oscar paid \$5000 for the collaboration of his specialist: was more than the wholesale value of the drugs he was carrying. He arranged for cocaine to be packed into mechanical car parts. Since Oscar is muscular and had a shaved head he had no difficulty passing himself off as a mechanic. In contrast, Tanya received her drugs packed into a briefcase. She spotted

immediately that carrying this would draw attention to herself. She packed it into her check in luggage in the hope that it would pass undetected.

### **Drugs strapped to bodies or packed in clothes**

Five respondents (four women and one man) had drugs strapped to their bodies or hidden in clothing. The male mule had the drugs strapped to his abdomen; one experienced female mule reported doing the same in the past. Women mules often had drug packed into underwear: usually in a bra or packed around their buttocks and hips. Unlike packing in suitcases this was often customised for the individual mule's body shape. This required some specialisation; this role was often filled by a woman:

[The contacts] are men, the ones I met in Brazil – men, it's men, you never talk to a woman you talk to a man. The only time you talk to a woman is when she's going to look at you to see your size to go and buy the clothes you have to wear. The men don't know the size. (Angela, experienced mule, p.21)

It is difficult to say if this method of concealment was used more for men or women, however it was done in a gendered 'style'. Packing drugs in these places had a double function: one was that a female officer was needed to conduct a bodily search however suitcases could be searched by men or women. Furthermore, Donna also noted that suitcases were scanned as a routine practice but bodies were not physically searched routinely. Secondly, packing drugs in this way exaggerated women's figures. This is a reaction to the male 'gaze': by accentuating those supposedly most natural aspects of the female body – curves of breasts and hips - the design relies on male appreciation of those forms and norms about looking at those parts. Most customs officers are male.

Strapping drugs to one's body, or wearing packages packed into underwear was uncomfortable. One woman had 1 kilo packed in a bra, another 2 kilos packed around her hips and buttocks. Frank had two kilos strapped to his abdomen. This was a constant physical reminder that they were smuggling drugs which some mules found unsettling.

### **Body-packing: swallowing capsules**

'Body-packing' refers to the practice of storing drugs inside the body, either in body cavities such as the vagina, rectum or stomach (Gregory and Tierney 2002; Stewart, et al.

1990; Traub, et al. 2003). The only form of internal concealment which appeared in this research was in the stomach by swallowing capsules<sup>81</sup>.

The practice of swallowing capsules of cocaine compressed into capsules inside latex (fingers of gloves or condoms) has been subject to significant media attention over the last 20 years<sup>82</sup>. Reports of mules in the media have focussed on the phenomenon of swallowing capsules; the ‘swallower’ in press reports is overwhelmingly a woman.

Importantly, swallowing capsules was not the most common method of concealment in this small study, or in others (see summary of Harper et al’s research at the end of this section). Furthermore, the majority of ‘swallowers’ are not women. Although arrest statistics are notoriously problematic as indices of crime, international data on the sex of ‘swallowers’ or body-packers is consistent. Data on 1715 mules arrested at Heathrow airport over a six year period showed that three quarters of ‘swallowers’ were men and that a greater portion of men than women had swallowed capsules (Harper et al. 2000: 107). Similar data collected in Schiphol Airport, Holland (from 2004-2007) confirmed that 77.3% of ‘body packers’ were male (Dorn, et al. 2008). Lastly, the majority of ‘body packers’ seen in hospitals are male (Heinemann, et al. 1998). Traub et al. note that historically the majority of ‘body-packers’ have been men although they also note that there has been increasing demographic diversification to include pregnant women and children (2003: 2519). Zaitch also notes this historical diversification (2002).

Unlike the other methods of concealment, the mule spent a lot of time with their contact or trainer preparing to swallow the capsules of cocaine:

‘Two weeks before they are due to leave the training starts. They are trained by swallowing grapes, carrots or banana pieces and they follow a diet to regularise their digestive cycle. The last two days they eat very light meals: vegetables, fruits and no fat. The painful loading process takes in some cases few hours, walks and massages helping to accommodate the balls and some yogurt, olive oil or Vaseline to swallow them.’ (Zaitch 2002: 152).

Caroline was already living in Ecuador when she agreed to work as a mule. She spent extensive time with her contacts while they trained her:

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<sup>81</sup>‘Cavity-packing’ (concealing the drugs in the vagina or anus) was not used by any respondents in this research, nor was it ever mentioned in prison as a method of international transportation (although it was a common way to smuggle drugs in and out of prison). There is very little research on cavity-packing. This may be due to the lesser risk of packages bursting so relatively few cases coming to the attention of medical professionals. Furthermore, it is logical that body cavities are not large enough to store a critical weight of drugs. See the section below: investors and cost-benefit analysis.

<sup>82</sup> The first recorded case requiring medical attention appeared in 1973 concerned hashish rather than cocaine. It was not fatal. (Deitel and Syed 1973).



They gave me food and medicine, vitamins, said I needed to be healthy, I needed to be strong, I need to eat three times a day. They taught me how to swallow [prompt]. They taught me how to open my throat, first by swallowing grapes then with cocktail sausages, then sausages with the plastic on them and plus I was stretching my stomach by eating a lot of food and being healthy. So the last day I only ate chicken broth and that was to like clean out my stomach, they gave me vitamins B12 complex, they gave me vitamins to clean my liver and then that night I swallowed [the capsules]. (Caroline 2003 p.8).

I also interviewed Guillermo, a young Ecuadorian man who travelled to Colombia to begin his training as a mule:

They told us that we should not ingest anything at all, nothing solid. If it was liquid it had to be water only, pure, because if you, lets imagine, drank coca cola or some other drink with bubbles... they would burst. Your body's evolution would not take it... This would burst and you would die. Even if one capsule burst you would die. They said that we should not ingest any food in the plane and in order not to cause suspicions, you had to eat the food and chew it awhile so they would see you and you would have a bag hidden and you had to spit the food in there because if you would eat it, it [the capsule] could burst. (p.291, my translation).

Although it is widely considered to be dangerous for mules to eat when they are carrying capsules of cocaine in their stomach<sup>83</sup>, I have not been able to find evidence to confirm or deny this. Indeed, Lorenzo insisted he could eat when he had swallowed capsules without any danger.

In the above accounts mules learned (over a short period of time) how to transform their body into a transporting vessel. They took part in the uncomfortable process of swallowing grapes and in Caroline's case swallowing and defecating cocktail sausages with the plastic on. This preparation was explicitly physical, but was also a form of mental preparation for the task ahead.

Although Caroline and Guillermo were given extensive training to prepare, two mules (Paula nor Mandalina) had no preparation. Mandalina was helped with an anaesthetic spray so she couldn't feel her throat. Paula's experience has been described in detail earlier on. Although to an external observer, the picture of a large Colombian man forcing capsules of cocaine down the throat of a young, white woman might be imbued with a variety of cultural/social assumptions about gender, power, race and control. Paula explains carefully:

...it's something I know nothing about and I have to trust [my contact] [...]  
Whatever he has to do for this whole thing to get done for my boyfriend to be safe

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<sup>83</sup> See also the film 'Maria full of grace' (Marston 2005) which depicts mules pretending to eat then spitting the food into airsickness disposal bags.

then... you know I said yes, ok I give you control over me because obviously they're going to use me and I don't know how to do it myself. (Paula p.10)

Although her description earlier emphasises the physical pain and difficulty (compounded by the pressure to get the job done despite her lack of training), Paula also emphasises that she agreed to do the job. Paula was told that it would be 'like swallowing medicines'. This description was inaccurate to say the least. Although Paula consented to smuggling drugs, she did not know what this would entail until she came to do it. She was unprepared physically or mentally to do the job and found it incredibly difficult, painful and traumatic.

Capsules were usually about 2 cm in diameter by 6cm length (Dorado 2005: 320). Respondents described them as about the size of their thumb. Dorado describes the process of ingesting capsules:

'The process of ingesting can last all night. [...] They can ingest more than 100 units with a total weight of around 900 grams. [...] The process of swallowing is slow: after a certain period of time they have to swallow 5 or 6 units, helping them down with water, oil or silicon jelly.' (2005: 320).

It is widely assumed that those mules who swallow capsules are more vulnerable or naive than others: 'these particular couriers are often even more ill informed than conventional unskilled *mulas* [mules]. [...] In some cases *boleros* [swallowers] report to have suffered some sort of pressure from the *cargadores* [loaders]: psychological blackmail or explicit threats' (Zaitch 2002: 150). However, this research finds that the method of concealment cannot be taken an indicator of either coercion or victimisation. Those who swallow capsules had to be willing to do so. Furthermore, those mules who were coerced into trafficking carried it in their luggage, as did those mules who carried drugs unwillingly. Traffickers used these methods because they required the least participation from the mule. Although other researchers have reported that mules were physically threatened to swallow capsules (Dorado 2005; Huling 1995; Huling 1996), this was not a finding of this research.

### **Mules' control over how drugs were concealed**

At the start of fieldwork, I asked mules how risky they considered the method of concealment they used and asked if they would have chosen differently. However my question missed the point completely: mules did not and could not choose the way in which drugs were concealed. In all cases, the method of concealment was agreed during the initial

offer and was part of the verbal contract. Once they arrived in Ecuador, their contact arranged everything. Often drugs arrived pre-packed shortly before leaving no opportunity for the mule to negotiate any change of plan. Lastly, most mules accepted their contact's judgement over what was a 'good' method: they did not have the expertise (or cultural capital) to negotiate.

Nonetheless, Donna was an exception:

I was supposed to have drugs in my suitcase and at the last minute I changed the place of my drugs. They gave me a jacket with the drugs [instead]. But I didn't tell nobody, I didn't even call [home] to let them know I didn't have the drugs in the suitcase anymore, I have it somewhere else.

JF: How come you made that decision?

Just to see what would happen I guess. I didn't say... I said to the person who was going to bring me the drugs to come n get my suitcase to put everything in but then I said can you put it somewhere else? She asked 'does [the contact] know?' 'Yeah, yeah, he's the one that told me to ask you.' Bullshit. And [the contact] changed his phone number and he told me to give that person his phone number and I didn't.

JF: So you had control of what was going on?

Hmm mm...

[...]

JF: A lot of mules, they get told what to do: stay in your hotel, change your hotel, wait for the drugs, change your flight. But you never had that?

Nobody ever tells me what to do. Nobody. (p.209)

Several things happened which created an opportunity for Donna to take control and decide how *she* wanted to conceal the drugs. The first was that her contact (at home) changed his phone number and entrusted it to Donna to give to her second contact in Ecuador. The second was that Donna's contact did not 'supervise' her as with other mules. As Donna saw it:

She told me that she was very poor. She told me how much she was getting paid for this. I was getting three times more than she was and the most dangerous is to carry the drugs from Colombia to here.

JF: So she was working like a mule.

She was like me, she was like a kind of a *mula* [mule] herself and she told me, she said if she didn't do this job she was gonna get killed. It showed that she was poor. She was well dressed n all, but still... (Donna p.212).

Donna intercepted the flow of information between her contact in Ecuador and her contact in her 'home' country by withholding the phone number. This was only possible because she spoke Spanish and was able to convince her contact in Ecuador that this change was at the request of her initial contact. Although these events happened by chance Donna had dealt drugs for some years before then and her 'street smarts' were refined. Nonetheless, Donna's experience illustrates the difficulty in negotiating control over mule-work. It was really only due to a chance event that she was able to manoeuvre into a position of power.

### **Mules' control over what and how much drugs they carried**

The amount and the drug that mules were to carry was also part of the 'verbal contract'. Zaitch claims that 'some argued that cocaine was carefully weighed and packaged in front of them to avoid misunderstandings, others claimed to know just the weight carried and the very basic instructions' (2002: 147). Conversely, this research finds that the operation of sending mules was organised in a way which kept mules isolated from information about what was going on, beyond the most basic details. Drugs arrived pre-packed in the overwhelming majority of cases:

JF: What were the drugs like, did they just give you like packets of drugs or...

No, when the guy brought me that bag in the hotel, I was looking inside the bag and I couldn't see it because it was in this stuff in the bag. [takes my bag and indicates that it was put in the suitcase lining] inside it was. And I'm so stupid how I was, I was thinking hey, they forgot it! Yah! (both laugh) so I go really cool to the airport and then when they come to control me and they put the knife in the bag and this white power comes out I was only saying, I said, oh shit, I didn't see it. (Marina p.99)

Although Marina was perhaps somewhat naïve in hoping that they had forgotten to put the drugs in, the majority of mules did not particularly want to know what they were carrying. Furthermore, because Howard was coerced into trafficking, he was not in a position to ask questions about what he was carrying since he had little choice in the matter:

I didn't know what was in the bags. All I knew was 'product'.

JF: Do you know how much you were carrying?

I had no idea. I found out later it was 5.1 kilos: 3 kilos of cocaine and 2 kilos of heroin.

JF: That's a lot.

It didn't weigh anything. 10 lbs. But I didn't know. They were bags, they were items... nothing more, nothing less. (Howard 269)

Since the drugs always arrived pre-packed, mules could not confirm whether they were carrying what they had agreed to. Some found out when they were arrested that they were carrying heroin instead of cocaine, or a larger weight than they had agreed to. Although Donna could negotiate where the drugs were packed, Donna was arrested with heroin, rather than cocaine as she had agreed. Like almost every other mule (whether experienced or first-timer) she never saw the drugs.

### **Investor's control: cost-benefit analysis**

Investors and contacts controlled what and how much the mule would be carrying and how it would be transported. The weight was largely decided by profit margins, operating costs, capacity for investment and the kinds of expertise that investor's had access to (for example sophisticated chemical camouflage methods are dependent on knowing a skilled chemist). The methods of detection in use at each destination also dictated the method.

In order to make a profit, a critical quantity must be carried. Paul started by carrying a relatively small amount (about 40g) in a talc bottle. Although this was (in his own judgement) neither a particularly sophisticated method nor a particularly large amount, it covered the expenses of his holiday. In contrast, if a small organisation sends a mule, several people have to be paid and a profit made. Ryan was part of a medium sized smuggling enterprise. In order to make sending mules cost efficient they needed to send each mule with at least 2.5 kilos of cocaine on a regular basis.

The minimum quantity smuggled by mules in this research was around a kilo. Estimates of the weight of drugs one person can successfully swallow vary. Zaitch reports 400g – 1 kilo (2002: 149). First time mules Paula and Caroline both swallowed around a kilo: this seems to concur with Traub et al.'s analysis of body-packers requiring medical attention (2003). Lorenzo, estimated that he could swallow up to a kilo and a half.

Mules were never given opportunities to discuss or negotiate their labour with investors. Structures of business ensured that mules rarely met organisers since they were often recruited by specialists who had no organisational role. Secondly during mule-work the modus operandi designed out the need for the mule to do anything more than follow instructions:

You get told what to do, you either accept it or not. It had already been discussed by contacts. (Sharon 2003: 13).

The situation was much the same for experienced mules:

JF: Did you say, I want to wear, I want to put it in my bag?

No you don't say nothing, they just bring. They don't tell you how they gonna make it how they gonna give it they just... last minute somebody just say you have to go then the stuff is ready so you don't know. (Angela 2003: 19).

Only Catalina (a professional mule who worked for her partner) had control over her work:

JF: What about how it's packed? You get to decide that?

No, but if I'm not sure about the packing I just call back [boyfriend] and we pack it again. My husband told me how to test the drugs – not take them, but to test them: rub it between your fingers to see how it is and stuff.

[...] My boyfriend, he was taking advice from me. He knows my strong character and he asks me if it's ok like this, or if I have another idea. He would tell me what I was supposed to be picking up and if I arrive and it's not what we talked about at home then I call him. I see this or that and maybe sometimes I think it's better [to pack it] like this. He thought it was better that I should feel in control while I'm there; like I'm his eyes in this place. He respects this because I'm gonna put myself in the shit so it's better like this so that I'm in control.

JF: I take it you grew this confidence and trust over time? Like it wasn't always like that.

[Nods] After time I got experience. (Catalina p.227-8).

Although experience and expertise were important resources for gaining control over her work, her relationship with her boyfriend was possibly the most important resource.

Since most mules had no expertise in the business (that I was able to interview), mules were content to follow instructions from their contacts who were, supposedly, experts in the business:

JF: How did it feel being told what to do?

Umm... normal, actually. Just like normal work. I looked at it as a job, he told me what to do n I did it. I really trusted them. I really did. (Marta p.219)

As I showed in the last chapter, following instructions from your 'employer' who was sometimes a partner or a friend was not necessarily an unusual or stressful thing to do.

Many mules, like Marta assumed the role of employee. However, some mules were not happy with how the drug was packed: they judged the job to be poorly done particularly where luggage emitted strong smells or where the garments with the cocaine sewn in were impractical, too obvious, smelt strange or were uncomfortable. However, since this was usually a couple of days at most before mules were due to leave, there was no time to arrange anything else.

## **Packing the drugs: conclusions**

### *Method of concealment*

Respondents carried drugs in a variety of ways but most commonly in their luggage.

Method of concealment	Women	Men
Luggage (concealed in the suitcase itself, or objects inside the suitcase)	6	3
Internal	3	1
Clothing (including underwear)	3	0
Strapped to body	1	1

*Method of concealment (the present study)*

This echoes previous findings from a much larger study<sup>84</sup>:

Method of Concealment (carriers only <sup>85</sup> )	Women	Men
Luggage	51%	43%
Internal	21%	25%
Clothing	15%	25%
Strapped	12%	19%

*Method of concealment adapted from Harper et al. (2002: 107).*

Two interesting findings emerge about the method of concealment. Firstly, drugs were most frequently concealed in luggage. This contradicts popular stereotypes of female mules who are almost always described swallowing drugs in capsules (for example Marston 2005).

Secondly, in Harper et al.'s study, men and women carried drugs in roughly similar ways. This research can add to this. Although the methods that men and women mules used were similar, the 'styles' in which they were employed were gendered in style. Jacobs and Miller found that women drug dealers did business in different 'styles' than male dealers to avoid arrest (1998). These often relied on mimicking standard norms of femininity. For example rather than hanging out on street corners selling drugs as men did (and where they would be mistaken for prostitutes), women did business elsewhere. Miller suggests that 'gender may be used as a resource for women to accomplish participation in and avoidance of crime.' (2002: 452). However, unlike women drug dealers in Miller and Jacobs study,

<sup>84</sup> Neither of these findings can be considered representative since they are based on arrested mules. Furthermore, there may be regional variations which are not reflected here.

<sup>85</sup> In the original table Harper et al. (2000: 107) included both carriers and non-carriers in their percentage calculations. I have recalculated the percentages here to include only those cases where the mules were arrested carrying drugs and have excluded cases of 'meeters/greeters'.



mules (men or women) had little control over how the drugs would be packed. Since the method of concealment was chosen by investors, mules were not the ‘authors’ of this performance of gender. Miller also notes that whilst an individual’s actions might serve to reproduce gender structures, this may not be conscious or indeed the purpose of the action. Evidence here suggests that although gender did shape the manner in which drugs were packed, gender was not the most important aspect of how drugs were packed.

### *What and how much mules carried*

The Middlesex probation service collected data on 1715 men and women arrested in drug trafficking charges at Heathrow Airport between July 1991 and September 1997. Secondary analysis of that data found that ‘female couriers were physically carrying more drugs in terms of weight and value than male couriers’ (Harper et al. 2002: 101). Harper et al; considered this to be counterintuitive since masculinity is more closely linked to risk-taking behavior. Findings of this research may help to pick apart this apparent paradox.

This research has learned that the volume of drugs carried was not decided by the mule but by the investor. Furthermore, since drugs were always pre-packed, there was no opportunity for the mule to confirm they were carrying the amount they had agreed. Thus, the amount of drugs carried cannot be attributed to the mule.

The apparent ‘gender paradox’: whereby women were carrying more than men is also interesting. It is very possible that the individuals who were part of the Middlesex probation service study were not necessarily mules. In my fieldwork I discovered that it was not only mules who carried drugs but also sometimes recruiters, partners in a small organisation, or individuals working independently. Thus, the groups of men and women in the data are probably not comparable. Given the sexist nature of the drugs business, it is likely that more women than men were working for someone else and that more men than women were working for themselves. Since larger organizations have to make larger profits, it seems plausible that women may have been (overall) carrying a larger quantity of drug.

Both these findings have implications for sentencing which is based on weight and class of drugs as it is in the UK and the USA (Harper, et al. 2000; Huling 1996) which will be examined in Appendix 5.

## Doing the job

Many mules did not think about backing out. Frank, Howard, Graham, Donna, Marta and Paula all travelled to the airport without any second thoughts<sup>86</sup>. There was also an interesting gender split in respondents: no men considered backing out. It is difficult to say if this gender split is indicative of wider trends. This will be discussed later.

Many caught a taxi by themselves to the airport and had little further assistance from their contact; others were assisted to complete their task by their contacts. Howard was accompanied by his contact who stood and watched him pass a customs inspection<sup>87</sup>. In sum, they continued in the same manner that most mules had so far: in a manner largely characterised by collaboration.

Caroline thought about backing out but decided that she wanted to complete the job. She was living in Ecuador at the time. Unlike other mules she was in her usual social milieu which armed her with resources to change her mind and back out of the trip:

Before I was going to swallow, I said I don't want to do it. I was afraid and [my boyfriend] says if I don't want to do it, don't do it. And I said no, I've gone too far. And it's kind of like this thing when I start something, I finish it. I want to prove that I can do whatever I want to do. (p. 8).

Caroline had access to a number of capitals: both social and economic. Her boyfriend offered to help her back out, furthermore unlike other mules she was not obligated to do the job by partners, nor was she involved because of debt. Many mules finished the job through their own motivation to conclude the deal they agreed to.

## Backing out

A significant number of mules interviewed thought about or attempted to back out of working as a mule (6 out of 15 mules)<sup>88</sup>. This section examines what happened when mules tried to resist taking part in mule-work.

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<sup>86</sup> Some mules were arrested before the airport. I only have data on this from those mules I interviewed in 2006.

<sup>87</sup> In Ecuador and Colombia baggage is frequently opened and searched by customs before passengers check in.

<sup>88</sup> This is probably a direct result of recruiting respondents in prison: logically, those mules who attempted to back out were the most nervous and therefore the most likely to attract the attention of customs officers.

	Men	Women
Did not wish to back out	Graham Frank Michael	Sharon Tanya Paula
Thought about backing out		Anika Caroline Donna
Attempted to back out		Amanda Marta Mandalina Manuela
Coerced (no option to back out)	Howard	Marina

*Backing out.*

### **Getting scared**

Mules who had been previously willing suddenly got scared just before they were due to travel. This was brought on by a number of different things: delays in drugs arriving, badly packed drugs, a lack of trust in their contacts in Ecuador and nightmares about the upcoming trip. Many could not attribute suddenly wanting to back out to anything in particular. Some commented that working as a mule only seemed ‘real’ once they had the package of drugs in their hands or on their bodies. It was not until this point that the threat of arrest was tangible in a way it had not been prior to leaving. Many mules had put the purpose of the trip to the back of their minds.

When mules attempted to back out the limits of available action become apparent. This section is underpinned by Sewell’s description of social action (1992). He contends that for an individual to act they must have access to a ‘schema’ for action; resources to enact this schema and an ‘audience’ for legitimation. Thus this section examines what mules’ schemas for resistance were, what resources they had to enact the schema of backing out and who or what was their audience for legitimation. My conception of resources has been influenced by Bourdieu’s categories of capitals (1986).

### **Thinking about backing out**

Some mules thought about backing out. They soon realised they had little chance of success since they lacked the resources for any action:

When I was in the hostel the last night before I was supposed to travel... I was just looking at the things [the drugs]; they were packed already in my luggage, I was just thinking, should I do it, should I not do it? I was a little bit scared but I was thinking where [can] I put the drugs now? I already have them, I am inside the hotel, they

have my passport, where can I put 5kg? So I was thinking just once and nothing's going to happen to me.' (Anika: p.17)

Although it occurred to Anika to back out, she had no real 'schema' for action: nothing in her own experience informed her about how to back out. She could see only limited alternatives. The only option she saw was to run away, or to try and leave without the drugs. However, contacts had her passport and she did not have the skill to take out and hide 5 kilos of cocaine which were pressed into paintings. Having considered her options, she could only collaborate with her respondents and hope for the best.

Marina was coerced by her ex-partner. She also considered leaving the drugs but quickly realised that the consequences of leaving the suitcase in Ecuador were too serious to contemplate:

I was thinking really I will leave that bag here and I will go without drugs back, then I was thinking I can't do it, because when I do it I will not see her [daughter] again. So I was really confused. (Marina p.98/99).

Both mules realised that they did not have the resources to be able to back out. The mule and the drugs were more heavily supervised while they were getting ready to leave: some mules were physically supervised by a minder. In short, contacts now treated mules' bodies as valuable commodities. In other instances through, these control was often invisible: and was only made visible when mules tried to act against it.

### **Resistance as a symbolic gesture**

Drugs travel along the same 'scapes' and infrastructures as legal goods. They were occasionally subject to the same delays: landslides, volcanoes erupting, monsoon storms, protests and the occasional coup d'état were all known to hold up legal traffic of goods and people in Ecuador. More than one trafficker in prison missed their intended flight due to natural disasters. Furthermore, because of the risk of holding drugs in one place for long, it was very unusual for the drugs to be simply waiting for the mule to arrive. Any delays further up the chain could result in the mule being delayed. Marta had to change her flight twice because the drugs failed to arrive on the due date. She was getting extremely anxious and called her contact to threaten to return without the drugs:

I said that if the drugs didn't come by the next ticket I had booked, I'm going. He said I couldn't do that. I said yes I can. I had a bit of control but not that much. If you look at it, we don't have much control. Not really. (Marta p.219)

Her intention to return without the drugs was a symbolic gesture. If she had really intended to do that she could have caught a cab to the airport without further discussion. Unlike Anika, she still had her passport. In spite of her threat she waited: although she knew her contact well and had the social capital of her partner to draw on, she was also aware that her control over the situation was limited by her position in the trafficking hierarchy as a mule. She did not have the authority to legitimately make the decision to leave. She tried but her contact simply rejected her attempt as invalid. Her actions lacked legitimacy.

### **Attempting to back out**

Amanda pleaded first with her minder in Ecuador and then with Jane (her friend and partner of her contact):

[I was] with that Colombian guy I was arguing with [him] cause he wanted to sleep in the bed with me and I wanted him to sleep in the sofa bed. So, [anyway] he was like, don't worry about it. You're gonna get away with it – you're not the first one and you're not the last one, he told me.

But I had this gut feeling that I wasn't going to go through with it, plus when [Jane] called from the states and I told her you know, I can't do it, well she was like well you can't back off now because when you get back and if you don't do it, you're going to owe us \$4000. So that's why I didn't back down. Because I was already in debt; \$3000 for my rent, \$1000 for my light, \$600 for the gas, my mother was in debt by \$4000 in her rent and that's what I wanted it for. (Amanda 188).<sup>89</sup>

Her contact's first response was verbal reassurance and persuasion. When this did not work, her friend Jane bluntly explained her options to her: she could return without the drugs but she would owe them \$4000. Although she did not threaten Amanda, equally Amanda's debt bound her to complete the job. Amanda received \$2000 before she left which she had given to her mother to pay urgent debts. Amanda had no other resources for action and she agreed to finish the job.

Other mules pleaded with their contacts to let them back out. As it came closer to the time to leave, contacts got more desperate: hurried persuasions were quickly replaced by violent threats. Manuela's contact left the package of drugs with her 2 days before she was due to leave. Just before she left, he came to check she was wearing the package:

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<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in Mandalina's experience, 'He said you *have* to go. You can't do thinking now – they're pushing me out of the country! They said I have to go because they already sent you, spent money on you for the ticket for nothing... all this. [Said ticket was \$3000].[...] I just do what I'm told. I don't want to be here anymore. I took the choice to be here already and that's what I have to do. Its lots of money for the ticket. (p. 240).

It was really heavy: 2 ½ kilos. It was really uncomfortable. [Indicates where it was: all round her posterior and lower abdomen]. I felt like a lemon being squeezed. It was pressing on me. And then I changed my mind and I told him I don't want to do it. So, we had a discussion. He told me that if I don't want to wear the drugs... he threatened me. Said he would kill my family. He said it was not good to come here and then not take the drugs. Then I was really scared. I didn't know what to do so I was wearing the slip. (Manuela p.230/1)

In a second interview I asked Manuela how much control she had at this point:

I had no control over what I was doing. I was totally nervous, I was thinking a lot about what I was doing. [prompt] I was asking him [contact] if he can see it in the clothes. And he said no: it's too late to change. I was thinking that he was scared also (Manuela p.235).

This threats was credible her contacts at home knew where her family lived (her contacts were friends of her boyfriend)<sup>90</sup>. Conversely, Manuela knew nothing about her contact, had little control over him and little power to do much other than comply with his request. Furthermore, Manuela noticed that her contact was scared. It is likely that he was working for someone else and would suffer consequences himself if she refused to leave.

Bonny<sup>91</sup> was a single mother. She left her child with a good friend and his family (which included her contact). She did this willingly and did not think twice to trust a friend. Bonny's contact used her daughter to manipulate Bonny. Bonny called her contact and said that she wanted to return without the drugs; her contact replied:

Remember I have your daughter. You come back with the drugs and everything will be OK. (Bonny p. 310)

It is difficult to say if this was planned or her contact was just acting opportunistically. Interestingly, this echoes practices in the drugs trade. Stefan told me that leaving family members with traffickers was sometimes done as a guarantee amongst higher level traffickers:

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<sup>90</sup> It is difficult to know how well informed Manuela's contact was: whether he knew Manuela's contacts at home well (who knew her boyfriend who knew where her family lived) or whether he knew nothing and was simply bluffing.

<sup>91</sup> Bonny's situation is different from other mules: When she arrived, she was arrested as part of a 'sting' by the police. Her contact was arrested at the Ecuadorian border with a packet of drugs; he collaborated with the police and came to meet Bonny at the airport who was instantly arrested. Once she was arrested, the police instigated a sting operation using Bonny. The police recorded this phone call to her contact.

In big deals, it's ugly, but... If you are coming to Colombia to do a deal, you have to bring a family member with you and they stay in Colombia 'til the deal's done. [One of Stefan's friends did that for him.] If you steal or fuck up then they'll kill your friend/family member.

That's the Colombian way. It's ugly but there's so many traitors that's how it has to be, it's a form of kidnapping but that's the way it goes. Your friend or whoever gets looked after. If you get arrested get a lawyer to send a report or copy of documents to confirm and they'll go free. They might even send you [person in jail] money (Stefan p.57/8).

Here, bodies were employed as a form of capital, a deposit or insurance. When Stefan had no other resources to guarantee his cooperation his friend volunteered.

Violence is typically seen as an intrinsic and inevitable feature of dealing and trafficking markets, (Dorn, et al. 2005) necessary to highly structured, hierarchical organisations to enforce a rule of law where no legitimate enforcement exists. Pearson and Hobbs found that violence was 'bad for business' as it drew the attention of the police and was better understood as a sign that things were going wrong (2001).

In general though, data from mules suggests that the threat of violence against a loved one is sometimes used as a force for coercion when mules attempt to back out of the job. Importantly, it was a last resource when all other forces were insufficient. This conclusion extends to the business of working with mules: violence was not necessary for sending drugs by mule and was only employed when other resources had been unsuccessfully employed. Violence and threat against mules is therefore not routine, but was employed when mules tried to back out of the verbal contract.

### **Experienced mules: delaying the trip**

Since respondents were recruited in prison it is impossible to know from this group of mules if any mules ever successfully backed out. Available data suggest that it does not seem likely however one experienced mule did manage to both delay and back out of working as a mule. Unlike first time mules she had considerable capitals at hand: her relationship with her partner/contact was important as a source of legitimation, as was her experience as a mule. On one occasion she had a nightmare the night before leaving:

I woke up at 2am. I say I'm sorry I can't leave at 7am. They asked why not. So I said I can't travel. Can we change the day? They said OK, better like to so no one will be in danger. They gave me a day or 2. There was no bad reaction from them. No forcing. It was just OK. [...] When I told him I can't travel, I thought they're gonna... I was scared for a few minutes how to say...I thought they were gonna slap

me. [Then I was thinking that] their reaction is business, I have to take that. But no. They said OK another day. So I waited two days then I travelled. (Catalina p.156).

Although she could not back out completely, she could delay the trip. Although she anticipated some form of violent retaliation, her relationship protected her from this.

Neither Catalina nor Marta ever experienced any form of violent threat whilst working as a mule. It seems that in both cases having a relationship with someone in the drugs industry had a protective effect:

JF: Have you ever experienced any violence or felt threatened?

No.

JF: You think that's in a way because you had a personal connection?

Yeah. I was always protected because I was dating him. I was protected because of him.

(Marta p. 243)

Later in her career Catalina refused to pick up the drugs completely. This time she was working away from her partner:

I refused to pick up the drugs that trip. I think that was the first time when I wanted to change my life. I didn't want to [do it]. I lied to my husband: 'I called the people, they don't answer.' He says 'are you sure?' I don't know what happened; my husband was not stupid but... He said 'If you say like this, I will take it'. (p.183)

Catalina said that she was sure her boyfriend knew that she was lying to him: they had been together (romantically and as business partners) for some time. This 'resistance' was only possible due to her strategic position as a professional mule: she worked alone while she was away from her partner. She had no contact to watch over her and it was her job to call the contacts and arrange to collect the drugs. Lastly, I would speculate that it is possible that her partner was willing to absorb the expense of her trip this time since she had already made several trips for him.

### **Gender differences in backing out**

No male respondents attempted to back out. It is impossible to know if this is the result of interviewing a small number of men who had worked as mules or whether it reflects wider trends. Paul recruited mules. He thought that women were more likely to reconsider:



Women wimp out more than men, women think more, speak more, communicate more. They think up the odds more, see things that men might not see and perhaps they're not happy with the risk. (p.29)

It is also possible that having criminal experience stopped mules getting scared and backing out. Donna (who had also recruited mules) contends that:

Most of the people that I sent are people that have been to jail before, they've already dealt [sic] with drugs before so it wasn't people... I would never take someone that's innocent and that's quiet. I would never do that. I would always know people that knew what they were doing. (208).

She also thought that men: 'feel stronger and they feel more sure of themselves' (p.208).

Lastly, many mules commented that 'it didn't seem real' until the last moment when they received the drugs. In chapter eight, I examined the risks that mules thought about when considering if they would accept the offer of mule-work. Mules gave weight to those risks which were most apparent and most tangible. When women arrived at this point in the journey and had the drugs the risk of arrest, the associated shame and stigma were more strongly felt than the distant risks of home.

In summary, looking at what happens when mules attempt to back out brings into focus the blurry boundary between mules' collaboration and contacts' control. Interestingly, mules often participated willingly and actively in mechanisms of their own control: they gave their contacts passports or copies of their passports; they stayed in as requested; they talked to no-one about what they were doing and they gave their initial contacts information about themselves. Importantly though, mules did resist: sometimes symbolically but sometimes successfully too.

### **Overview and discussions**

The first half of this chapter examined how mule-work was organised. I found that mule-work 'designed out' the need for mules' participation and indeed discouraged their involvement at almost all stages. As a result few mules had any control over what they were carrying, how much they were carrying or the method of concealment. Although some experienced mules did have more control over their work, contacts (and investors) were firmly in control of all aspects of the mule's labour. This was the case for both female and male mules.

The second half of this chapter examined what happened when mules tried to back out. Contacts controlled mules by gaining control over and manipulating key resources, particularly information, bodies, money and drugs. These were the same resources that mules used to resist contacts' control. This made resisting difficult however it was not impossible; mules could also use their experience and social contacts to negotiate or in rare circumstances back out. These social resources were 'virtual' and travelled with the mule even though they were outside of their usual social milieu. I conclude that mules' participation in mule-work began and ended at the verbal contract. Backing out was almost impossible. Again, this was the same for men and women.

The following discussions attend to the role that gender played in shaping women's (and men's) work as mules.

### **Mules and contacts: gendered interactions**

Relationships between contacts and mules do not take place in a vacuum but exist in and are built upon social contexts which are shaped by gender, generation, class, sexuality and so on. Although mules travelled outside their usual social structural milieu, gendered norms of interactions were an important schema which mules (and contacts) drew upon to 'style' their interactions: this was sometimes intentional, but often habitual.

Graham had two contacts, both male. Their initial interactions took the form of somewhat stereotypical masculine pastimes:

I met the old guy in the lobby. He was watching HBO in English: the only English I heard the whole time I was here. The guy spoke broken English. We had some beer, smoked some cigarettes. [...] I felt cool. I felt like he wasn't going to fuck me over. (Graham p.191/2).

Despite being from different cultures and having little in common (including language) this form of normative masculine interaction put Graham at ease. Similarly, Caroline's interactions with her contact took the format of stereotypically female interactions. Instead of hanging out in a public place, they spent time in her contact's home:

The woman talked to me more than anyone else, [it was] just her and her husband. She was educated, well dressed, she spoke English, she gave me money, bought me clothes, brought me to her house. She made me feel comfortable and the fact that she was a woman, I felt very comfortable with her. (Caroline, 2003, p.4).

Although gender was one kind of shared structural space, the kind of femininity they shared was also co-constituted by class. Caroline emphasises that her contact was (like her) educated and well dressed: both indicators of middle class<sup>92</sup>. Nonetheless, although their interaction was shaped by gendered patterns of interaction, it was also shaped by the need for secrecy: training and discussion about trafficking inevitably take place in private. Giving Caroline money and buying her clothes was a subtle way of indebting her (I have described above how Amanda was indebted to her contacts which made it impossible to back out). Nonetheless, having a female contact was rare.

Interactions between male contacts and female mules took diverse forms. On Donna's first trip as a mule, her second contact was a good friend of her initial contact. She spent the week with him, hanging out, socialising, going to the beach and eating out. Her contact kept her company and treated her well in acknowledgement of their shared social network. This was rare. Most contacts in Ecuador were completely unknown.

Sometimes the interaction between male contacts and female mules was sexualised. Three female mules reported that their contact tried to have sex with them. Some contacts attempted to abuse their relationship with the contact, their position of power and the job of supervising mules to get into bed with mules; however this was rarely accepted by mules as a valid interaction. They still had the resources to deny this to their contacts. Although contacts were in a position of power, mules could and did say no. Words still had the power to produce action.

Nonetheless, one mule commented that masculinity was bound up with authority:

I think in a way men, especially those guys that are contacts in a way they start to control your life like 'we're in charge. You're just a mule so you do what we say.' But in the end it all comes down to 'it's a man'. The woman will start looking up to that man because he is controlling everything, he is the one supplying the money. I think in that way we are all weak, we tend to listen to the men. (Sharon, p. 16)

Sharon implies that 'listening to the men' was a bad thing: she felt that if she had not 'listened to men' she might not have been in prison. However, Angela (an experienced mule) commented that her contacts treated her well:

JF: How did you feel to be told what to do by a man?

You told in a nice way so you don't feel uncomfortable you know cause it's like a nice way. (Angela 2003: 21).

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<sup>92</sup> Although the meanings of class vary across nationalities and cultures, the markings of middle class: education, feminine comportment and dress are remarkably international.

Although her contacts treated her well initially, once she was in prison they abandoned her and her family:

In Pakistan they speak mostly half, half English but hey speak Punjabi – but I understand because I had a Punjabi friend for years and I was wearing their clothes so they respect me so they didn't know the real me.. [...] They pay. Like when I go to baby-sit; when I go to buy the pampers [nappies] they're there [already bought by her contacts at home], so like they are stealing your heart, you don't think of danger, you believe in your heart it's good people it's nice people. Only when you travel, [when] you [are] in trouble you realise they are bastards. (Angela p.21).

### **Threat: ethnicity, intimidation, masculinities and 'the Mafia'**

Everyday interaction was founded upon gender regimes; so were threats of violence.

Several mules cited their contacts' nationality or Mafia associations when they described being threatened. Respondents used the term 'Mafia' to refer to any organised crime group rather than Italian or Italian-American Mafias).

Many saw their contacts as threatening individuals, usually relying on stereotypes of drug traffickers as ruthless, scary and violent:

I felt pressured. [prompt] Especially after seeing the Colombians, you know, *reunidos* [together], together like... There was the woman: the woman was like 'Oh yeah. She'll do what she has to do'. [threatening tone of voice] It was just like something out of that Mafia movie with Al Pacino, you know, 'Scarface' or whatever they call it. They were all meeting there and they were talking over the suitcase like... Before anything went down, I couldn't feel like I was doing this, it was like in a fantasy land. Reality hit me exactly at the moment when I saw them that night, together, with the suitcase on my bed, on the hotel bed. I didn't speak Spanish too good at that time, especially when the Colombians talk really fast. So when I was watching that it was like I wasn't there. Like I was watching, I put myself like I was watching from the outside and I wasn't in with them but I was actually in *with* them.[...]

I was their puppet. I felt like I was a puppet with strings and they were controlling. Yeah, I wouldn't move, wouldn't speak, you know cause I would only speak when I was spoken to. I asked one question and he was like 'don't worry about it'. I felt like uff... I'm not even gonna mess with them cause they'll probably just kill me and take the suitcase and... (Amanda 188)

Paula had been visiting Ecuador to learn Spanish. Quito is home to many Colombian migrants. However, her contacts' nationality was in this context a source of threat:

He was... I didn't understand him well... he was a scary person... in himself... He was a Colombian and they kidnap people and... (Paula, p.304)

Howard's account also drew on images of Colombians in the media bound up with his own experience:

We weighed the idea of going to the police but to me, the immediate image I got was cocaine cowboys<sup>93</sup>. And gunfire and... (p. 282).

Colombians are particularly visible in mules' accounts of their contacts. Whilst this might give the impression that the drug business in Ecuador is dominated by Colombians, empirical research sheds some light on the role and manipulation of 'ethnic crime' reputation (Bovenkerk, et al. 2003). Bovenkerk et al. contend that ethnicity should not be reified, since it is fluid and performative. They found that organisations and individuals managed their 'ethnic reputation': 'playing with reputations that already exist, either by obscuring ethnic ascription or exaggerating stereotyped images.' (2003: 28). They describe one Colombian who traded on the reputation that his surname gave him (Escobar). To those who knew little about Colombia this was used to considerable effect, however other Colombians would have been fully aware that his was actually a relatively common surname and that he was probably not related to the infamous Pablo Escobar.

This research finds that similarly ethnic reputation could be manipulated in this situation as a force for threat of mules. Although not all contacts may have been Colombian, the stereotype of the Latin Mafioso could be and was, used to elicit consent from mules.

Mandalina was from South East Asia and cited an African 'Mafia':

If I go back without the drugs I think they're gonna kill me.

JF: Did they ever say that to you?

No, they don't say but I knew from my country. African people are working with the police and the Mafia. If you make them spend money for nothing they're gonna put you in trouble. (Mandalina p.240).

In the previous chapter Howard told of how he had travelled to 'cartel headquarters' while he was working in the music industry and had seen the cartel first hand. Donna told of one man that she had met who had been subject to retaliation even after he had served a prison sentence:

I knew a guy once that came back from [her family's historical home], a guy that I used to know as a kid with my mum and her husband. He was disappeared and he had just come out of jail. He was starting back again: he'd started to sing, he made

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<sup>93</sup> A film by the same name was released in 1979 (Lommel, U. 1979 'Cocaine Cowboys', USA.)

CD's n everything. He started clean, [but] he was still in his shit. And he disappeared for 2 months. After 2 months they found his body without a head and missing a hand. (Donna, p.200).

Some threats were built on myths surrounding crime groups popularised by the media. Reuter contends that: 'the Mafia may be a paper tiger, rationally reaping the returns from its reputation while no longer maintaining the forces that generated the reputation.' (1983: xi). Although the Mafia as a group may be trading purely on reputation and individuals may manipulate their ethnicity to adopt or play up ethnicity as a tool for intimidation, sometimes threats were entirely credible; a minority of mules seen or heard of retributions and threats which were carried out.

Although respondents highlighted the ethnicity of their contact it is important not to miss the obvious importance of masculinity in producing threat. Although masculinity was not always used to manufacture threat, threat could rarely be manufactured outside of masculinity<sup>94</sup>.

This research found that a minority of contacts were women. Those women were often concentrated in specialisations which were associated with female bodies: for example recruiting mules, taking care of mules, training them to swallow capsules or organising where to pack the drugs. In short, women worked in jobs which did not require them to be threatening.

Since masculinity and criminality are closely intertwined, criminal credibility and authority were attributed to male contacts firstly on the basis of connections, but relied on the immediate presence of masculine 'bodily capital' to function (Hobbs, et al. 2002).

This display of immediate power (bodily capital) and socially connected power (Mafia connections/social capital) served to control mules directly through physical presence, but also remotely from a distance. Credible threats were made (and upheld) against loved ones across continents on the basis of the potential power of the organised crime group (and their international reach). Sometimes this 'potential' was performed explicitly. Frequently though, no explicit performance was necessary: mules relied on media portrayals of organised crime groups as ruthless, violent and international to draw their own conclusions.

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<sup>94</sup> Discussions and interviews with high level (all male) drug traffickers shows this to also be true at higher/organisational levels of the industry. Although some women can work at the highest level and are able to command respect and back up threats to avoid being robbed, all agreed it was significantly more difficult for women than men to be received as 'credible' because she was a woman. Cristiano commented that women could be more violent and ruthless than men: he also noted that they were less likely to be searched entering nightclubs than men were. Nonetheless, he also contended that this was not sufficient to command the reputation necessary to run a drugs business.

## **Chapter conclusion**

Existing research has described (women) mules' participation in their work as a mule as passive under girded by the claim that women were coerced into working as a mule by either poverty or trafficker-gangsters.

An important finding of the last two chapters is that the role of the mule is one in which the mule has little control or even room for negotiation. In this respect, the position of the drug mule does appear to be inherently victimising. However, since mule-work allows all mules so little control and choice I cannot conclude that men or women were more or less 'victimised'. Nonetheless, small acts of resistance were possible. It was notable that those mules who were able to (rarely) negotiate control over their work (and even back out) were women. Being in a relationship (whether romantic or friendship) with one's contact occasionally created opportunities for mules to have control over their work. Experience working as a mule (or in other roles) in the drug business was also advantageous. Nonetheless, this finding must be interpreted cautiously since I interviewed a small number of men, none of whom were in equivalent positions as professional mules working with their partners. This research shows that drug trafficking takes place in and is built on existing structural relations. These were not created by the drugs trade, but rather those in the drugs trade sought to use these gender relations to establish authority, power and control (similarly see Maher 1997: 203). This was evident where threat and violence were used to coerce mules into finishing their job when they tried to back out. Nonetheless, violence and threat should not be seen as endemic to the process of sending mules, but rather understood as a resource that could be and was, employed as a last resort. Women, and also men were subject to threat.

On the other hand mules were not entirely unwilling in their work: many understood and agreed to a verbal contract of mule-work. Several respondents collaborated with contacts and saw themselves as free agents even though they may not have had any viable choices except to finish the job they had agreed to.

Thus, the question of whether mules are victims or agents in their labour is not a useful one. In no way did mules have 'free choice' once they agreed to work as a mule, however neither can they uniformly be described as passive or unwilling. Nonetheless, concepts such as free choice and individualism bear little relevance in this context and relying on them obscures the diverse ways that women and men negotiate, resist, or simply wish to do the job, get paid and get on with their lives.

# **CONCLUSION:**

## **Beyond binary constructions of drug mules**

### **Introduction**

This thesis had two important aims. The first was to expose and challenge sexism in social research on drug trafficking. This was done by reviewing and critiquing existing literature on the drug trade. I demonstrated that previous descriptions of drug traffickers have been founded on binary metaphors proliferated by Reagan's 'War on Drugs'. These dichotomies of citizen-victim versus criminal-victimiser left little space to appreciate women in international cocaine trade. As a result, research often portrayed women's participation in the international drug trade in ways that either marginalised women's participation or distorted it.

The second aim of this thesis was to address the gap in empirical research about women in the drug trade. This research set out to make women sociologically visible through empirical research with women who had been drug mules. Data was collected through ethnographic immersion and interviews, and was reflexively interpreted using narrative methods to avoid making too much sense out of the incoherence and chaos inherent in narrating ones' 'self' in prison. This research followed Lisa Maher's (1997) enquiry into questions of how victimisation or volition lead to and shape women's involvement in the drugs market. My exploration of gender and structure/agency was informed by Miller's excellent reconceptualisation of structured action approaches about 'doing gender' (2002).

This research explored the spaces between binary dichotomies: male and female, structure and agency, global and local, crime and reform, before and now, motive and justification. This thesis offers an 'alternative, critical understanding' (Bourgois 2003: 12) of mules and mule-work informed by the accounts of those involved and in their own words. By examining the experiences of men and women involved in mule-work I have begun to unpack the relationship between gender, coercion and victimisation and to pull apart the binary distinctions of gender/power: male/trafficker/victimiser/agent and female/mule/victim/subject.

Throughout this thesis I have sought to appreciate the complexity of living and telling about being a drug mule in prison. Doing so demanded that, this thesis cross a number of boundaries: public and private, before and after, here and there, inside and outside, and I hope us and them.



## Getting close enough to see

Ethnographic and qualitative methods emerged out of long-standing relationships and respondents' insistence on 'telling their story'. Different methods of research would have told a different story about women in drug trafficking. Qualitative interviews could have been used. Indeed, it was tempting to 'get in, get the information and get out' (Maher 1997:232). Building and maintaining a presence in the field was time consuming; entering the lives of respondents and having them enter mine was exhausting, joyful and painful at times.

Nonetheless, sustained presence in prison allowed me to do more than just 'get the information'. Prolonged contact with respondents (in some cases over the course of several years) allowed me to better understand how stories about being a drugs mule are crafted and why and how they are told. Doing so has enabled me to better understand the politics involved in claiming to be a victim, an agent, a woman or a man and what respondents meant when they talked about their experiences. In short, it is only 'through sustaining a long-term presence in the research field that...the disparity between representations and realities can be recognised and understood' (Crewe 2006: 365).

This account is nonetheless bounded by the methodology employed, the site of research and the respondents recruited. Conducting one off interviews with mules who had never been caught outside of prison would no doubt have told a very different story. Nonetheless, researching serious, active criminals outside of prison is difficult: they are hard to find and have little reason for cooperating with the researcher however there are notable exceptions (Adler 1993 and Zaitch 2002). Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the data produced would be any more or less storied or constructed.

The majority of research on mules has been conducted in prisons (see appendix 1) as has the majority of research on international drug traffickers (Decker and Chapman 2008; Matrix Knowledge Group 2007; Pearson and Hobbs 2001; Pearson and Hobbs 2003; Reuter and Haaga 1989). However, what this research has done - which departs from previous methodologies - is to take seriously the role of prison and imprisonment in shaping respondents' narratives about being a drug trafficker, and in particular one's stated motive for getting involved in drug trafficking. This research has shown that getting caught and subsequent dealings with judges, prison psychologists and other inmates meant that respondents were frequently asked to narrate their involvement in the drug trade for diverse audiences. In the prison context, one's narrative about working as a mule (or indeed being a drug trafficker) could be a form of cultural capital, a form of repair-work or a tool for coming to terms with the reality of serving a long prison sentence far from home.

## Summary of empirical findings

This research extends what is substantively known about women drug mules in the international cocaine trade. Previous research focussed only on women's motives for working as a mule. In contrast, this research sought to understand the process of women's involvement broadly. It explored women's entry into mule-work as a process. I examined how mules came across the offer of mule-work, what motivated them to accept the offer and lastly how respondents made a decision to work as a mule. By interviewing male and female mules, as well as first time and experienced mules I was able to contextualise women's experiences as mules.

This research found that although a minority of respondents were 'volunteers' who sought out a contact through a successful mule, the majority were presented with an offer of mule-work by an acquaintance who was often a friend of the family or a romantic partner. The offer took the form of (informal) employment however often these offers of mule-work were attached to social obligations. A minority of mules were blackmailed or threatened into working as a mule, all by people they knew.

Next, I explored women's motives for working as a mule. Motives were diverse, multiple and sometimes contradictory. Gender underpinned women's motives in diverse ways. Motherhood, familial responsibility romantic love, and economic concerns were all important. Discourses of motherhood and love varied according to nationality, ethnicity and generation. They incorporated elements of 'traditional' femininity (centred on care, responsibility for children and love) and 'modern' femininity (autonomy, independence and the need to stand apart from men in their lives). Read in the context of prison these discourses of traditional femininity were potent acts of 'repair work'. Nonetheless, their appearance in mules' narratives was not just cynical performances but reflected heartfelt engagements and motivations. Importantly they were more diverse than either the 'feminisation of poverty' or the 'emancipation' theses can account for. Respondents incorporated aspects of 'modern' and 'traditional' femininities in their narratives pragmatically.

I then examined how respondents made the decision to work as a mule. I examined the contexts for decision-making, the information available and how respondents enacted agency in their decisions to work as a mule. Most respondents were involved in mule-work through their own choice, albeit in circumstances not of their own choosing. This was also true where mules were pressured or coerced. Women often made their decision to work as a mule as a form of 'connected rationality': they made their decision *with* significant others and with significant others in mind. These aspects of agentic behaviour would have been

missed by 'rational choice' perspectives underpinned by individuality and emphasis on economic costs and benefits.

The second section of empirical findings examined mule-work. This is the first research to systematically examine mule-work. I examined two phases of mule-work: travelling and arriving, and secondly collecting, packing the drugs and preparing to leave. This thesis was unable to examine the work of travelling and delivering the drugs since most of the mules who participated in this research were arrested on their first trip.

There was a basic format for 'doing the job' (travel, meet with the contact, collect drugs, go to the airport) however respondents experienced different levels of control, management and surveillance by their contacts during their journey. Although a minority of respondents were free to enjoy their 'holiday', the majority were heavily supervised while they waited in Ecuador. Overall, mule-work offered the mule few opportunities for control or choice over themselves or their work once they left home. Technologies and processes of mule-work (the way that the mule was minded by their contact in Ecuador and in particular how the drugs were packed) all 'organised out' the mule from opportunities to take decisions (or indeed to make mistakes).

Despite the apparently coercive nature of the job, many mules entered into it willingly and their participation was marked by collaboration and cooperation with their contacts throughout. This included actively giving up information (and sometimes their bodies) to the control of their contacts. Other mules resisted or tried to take control in other ways which were sometimes symbolic and sometimes successful nonetheless there was ultimately little room for manoeuvre. Backing out was impossible: mules' compliance was ultimately assured through threat of violence to family members, but only as a last resort. Although power and control were often organised (or took advantage of) gendered regimes, they were not exclusively organised along binaries of male/agent and women/subject. Indeed, often those mules best able to negotiate control of their work were women since they had close relationships with their contacts at home. This afforded mules the social capital necessary to resist their contact's control.

This research has explored the ways in which respondents enacted agency and experienced victimisation. I showed that these were not mutually exclusive nor were they ontological opposites. Looking at the nature of mule-work, and understanding how contacts sought to control mules enabled a better understanding of how agency and victimisation are imposed, collaborated and resisted by mules.

## **Reading victimisation and volition: power/knowledge and politics**

Portraying women drug mules as either victims or agents (or indeed both as this thesis has done) is a political act and has consequences. In chapter 4, I described how adopting victim status was an important political act in prison that could be used powerfully to gain access to rights and privileges. On the 'outside' campaigns on behalf of (exclusively female) mules depend on their status as suitable victims for public sympathy and support. Campaigns to promote the interests of (female) drug mules highlight women's victimhood: as subjects of gendered poverty, as victims of violent, trafficker-men and as prisoners in a (globalised) criminal justice system which is blind to the gendered nature of their offending and imprisonment. In this context, the proposition that women mules may be agents is likely to be met with suspicion.

Nonetheless, this thesis cannot justifiably parrot politically popular and well worn discourses of strategic victimisation. Doing so would at best produce a stultified vignette of the phenomena at hand 'with as much validity as a posed photograph at a formal wedding' (Young forthcoming: chapter 6, p.6). At worst though, recounting only women's victimisation reifies the binary categories of female/victim and male/criminal and in doing so perpetuates the myth that women have only ever been victims, and as a result 'that women cannot be effective social agents on behalf of themselves or others.' (Harding 1987: 5 cited by Miller 2002: 434).

Young notes that: 'only too often, ethnography depicts too much consistency, too much constancy, too little contradiction, and too high definition of account' (forthcoming, chapter 6, page 6). Instead, this thesis has attempted to avoid reification through exploring the 'disembeddedness' of late modernity (Young 2007: 3). This thesis reflects this disembeddedness in two ways. Drug trafficking (the subject and context of this research) is not bounded by community, national boundaries or shared culture (see Urry 2000). The heterogeneity of respondents reflects the disembedded nature of the drugs trade: respondents came from all corners of the world bringing with them diverse experiences, biographies and different points of cultural reference. This heterogeneity precluded drawing straightforward conclusions about the global social phenomenon of drug trafficking. Secondly, disembeddedness was experienced at a personal level (Young 2007: 3). Immersion in the narrative landscape of prison allowed for an appreciation of the fragility, chaos, contradiction and pragmatism in respondents' narratives of being a drug mule, a woman and a prisoner. Multiple layers of narration produced heterogeneous responses, justifications and motives which compose a description of female and male traffickers as I knew them: as creative individuals constantly re-writing themselves in response to current situations and

demands. Nonetheless, respondents insisted on the facticity of their narratives. This thesis therefore also takes seriously the circumstances and sequences of events which respondents described to explore how coercion, victimisation, choice and agency are constituted in the context of recruitment and participation in the drug trade as mules.

This layering and multiplicity of description does much to avoid the danger of reifying the categories this research has sought to explore: structure/agency and gender. Problematically though, this analysis has been limited by the structured action approach: this will be discussed below in greater detail.

### **Theoretical insights into gender and victimisation**

Prior research on women in the drug trade was underpinned by a conception of social structures (including gender) as static and binary: women drug mules were ‘propelled’ into mule work by social structures of gender and poverty. Thus, the insight that gender is constructed in social action rather than preceding it distinguishes this research from previous studies of women drug mules. This emphasis on doing and enacting gender precludes writing about gender as static and binary. Miller contends that structured action theory provides a means of bridging the structure/agency divide and in doing so be able to ‘see’ agency without relying on binaries of victim/agent (2002). By prising open the space between binaries of structure and action, victim and agent, this thesis has demonstrated that victimhood and agency are not absolute, nor are they mutually exclusive. Lisa Maher’s research on women in the street level crack market in Brooklyn, New York opened up this space considerably. This thesis thus extends on this theme.

In contrast to previous research on drug mules, this research foregrounded mules’ agency: it explored the ways that respondents navigated, bargained with, resisted and reproduced social structures to creatively make viable pathways for action. Data demonstrated how the social structures in women’s (and men’s) lives were multiple, contingent, fluid, and situationally specific. Gender was continually being ‘done’: through women’s ‘journey’ as a mule: from recruitment, motive, working with contacts, preparing to leave, to imprisonment and finally to interview.

This research shows that women’s motives for working as a mule were a form of structured action. Social structures of gender were reproduced by respondents as keenly felt desires, obligations and identities. Although gendered identity was prominent in respondents’ motives (and justifications) for working as a mule, gender was not always the most salient social structure in mule-work. It was contingent on other social structures,

current demands and meanings which were dependent on context. Although understanding gender was important for understanding women's involvement in mule-work, it was not the only important social structural factor: generation, age, nationality and relational contexts were all important in mule's narratives.

This research showed that victimisation and agency often co-existed in women's experiences of working as a mule: from recruitment to 'doing the job'. Even when it appeared that women 'had no choice' but to work as a drugs mule, they continued to position themselves as decision-makers (on behalf of themselves and those they cared for) rather than passive participants. This was true in relation to generalised disenfranchisement: gendered poverty, familial responsibility and direct interpersonal victimisation by contacts. For many women in this study, working as a mule appeared to be a creative (and apparently logical) solution to debts and financial crisis and a viable way to gather greater resources to build a better future. This is not to romanticise women's (criminal) agency, but rather to acknowledge that victimisation did not preclude purposeful action and decision-making.

The data presented in this thesis offers further insights into the nature and relationship between gender and victimisation in women's offending. Contemporary research on drug trafficking focussed on the role of victimisation in women's entry into, and to a lesser extent their continued participation in the drug trade. This research has shown that participation in mule-work disenfranchised women by limiting their resources for available action. Importantly though, this was not only true for women who worked as mules, but also for men. This research has shown that studying women and men together is useful to disentangle the relationship between gender, victimisation and mule-work.

Lastly, although social structures were important, it was often the 'forefronts' of crime which provided the catalysts for action. Chance incidents: the death of a relative, chance encounters or even a lost phone number all shaped women's involvement in the drug trade in important ways. Such chance events were important catalysts for action in themselves and played an important role in respondents' narratives. These emergent events are a reminder that things do not happen because of social structures but rather that social structures shape how respondents thought about and reacted to emergent events.

### **'Seeing' structure and agency: reflections on the usefulness of the structured action approach**

In chapter two, I justified why I chose to adopt the structured action approach as outlined by Jody Miller in *The strengths and limits of 'doing gender' for understanding street*

*crime* (2002). The structured action approach was adopted as it would allow me to better 'see' women's agency in the context of their work as drug mules. Miller suggested using a definition of agency by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). They outlined agency as a 'triad' of elements: projection, decision-making and habit. This definition is broad and specific which allowed for an understanding of mules' agency which was similarly broad.

The structured action approach was useful in some respects which are outlined above. However, the structured action approach in part contributes to the somewhat fudged conclusion of this thesis (that women are neither agents nor victims) since neither Miller nor Emirbayer and Mische provide any clear-cut guidance as to what does *not* count as agency. Since the structured action approach sees both structure and action as mutually co-constitutive, it is difficult to 'see' where individual action and social structures begin and end.

The data here however demonstrates a continuum of structure and agency. At one end of the scale, this research found examples of hard structure, in other words circumstances where women could *not* have chosen otherwise. At this end of the continuum, gender/power hierarchies were played out at the interpersonal level. For example, Marina was coerced into working as a mule under threat to the wellbeing of her daughter. Her gendered role as mother, and her gendered hierarchical position in society offered her no resources (in terms of schemas for action, or material resources) to do much else other than collaborate. Similarly, Howard was coerced through threat to his partner. His gendered role as husband coupled with the fact that his contact was armed left him with no meaningful schema for action, or material resources to act otherwise.

At the other end of the continuum, this research found examples of hard agency: circumstances where mules *could* plausibly have chosen otherwise. Respondents identified that working as a mule was one action available to them at that time. For some this was as simple as working as a mule or not. They were situated at the intersection of multiple structures which provided different schemas and resources for action.

Between these two absolutes through, respondents often appeared to be reproducing social structures through their action. For example, several mules decided to work as a mule as a way of attaining a better home-life or opportunities for their children, selves or partners. The motive for this was often stated in the language of wanting to achieve normative (gendered) expectations. In this middle ground, the structured action approach offers little guidance to distinguish between agential action and passive reproduction of structures. In other words, it is difficult to say whether women were agents when they chose to work as a mule or whether social structures pushed them towards 'doing' this kind of femininity not

externally (i.e. feminisation of poverty) but rather more subtly through their desires, hopes and dreams for a better future.

This raises complex questions about agency in women's offending: if women offend in response to their gendered position then it may not be appropriate to conclude that this is a form of agential action. Nonetheless, the diversity of women's experiences here showed that women in similar structural space may claim different levels of agency and control over their decisions. On the other hand however, limiting what counts as agency to resistance is equally problematic (Bosworth 1999). The problem of agency and interpretation remains thorny (Maher 1997).

### **Extending structured action**

This research has taken the theoretical insights about 'doing gender' a step further. In this thesis I have shown that narrating oneself in prison and the interview is a further act of 'situated action'. I showed that claiming identity through narrative (as gendered, as victim or agent) did not take place in a cultural vacuum but in the politically charged, narrative landscape of prison. I described how claiming (or performing) types of femininity and victimhood were powerful forms of symbolic and social capital; successfully doing so reaped material rewards. Understanding this is crucial to understanding the different ways in which the interview speaks about the situatedness of gender (as well as other social structures including sexuality, class, nationality, generation and so on).

Paying attention to the narrative landscape in which explanations and motive are created is not new but takes up again C Wright Mills' claim of the importance of the 'vocabulary of motives' (1940). His insight that motives are a product of the social situation in which they are told challenges the structured action approach to understand how narratives produced in interviews are, in themselves, situated performances of identity which is contested and in constant reinvention.

### **Doing crime to do gender, or gender to do crime?**

Finally, empirical data presented here 'speaks back' to structured action perspectives on gender. It showed that although gender is a ubiquitous element of identity and social life nonetheless, offending was not always about gender. Respondents did not 'do' crime to accomplish gender as Messerschmidt claimed (1993), nor did they 'do' gender to accomplish



crime as Miller claimed (2002). Whilst Miller warns that research should not overemphasise the importance on gender (2002), the data presented here suggests that there may be a danger in over-emphasising crime. Respondents' narratives focussed on their involvement in drug trafficking because I asked them to talk about it but outside of the interview respondents narrated themselves in a variety of ways. Working as a mule was not always particularly salient: often, it was an event to be explained and then left behind. As I described in chapter 4, women's narratives were often about broader themes: finding God, being a mother, fate and destiny.

In the intervening two years since fieldwork finished I have kept in touch with and met with several respondents. Their lives have moved on from prison, and their narratives have too. Life after prison has prompted a new array of narratives of self and new identities in response to new sets of desires, worries and ambitions. Their involvement in drug trafficking has since taken on new meanings in response to current contexts.

# POSTSCRIPT

## Future avenues of research

This thesis has done much to illuminate the nature of mule-work. Nonetheless, there remains scope to extend on what was found in this thesis.

### *Mule-work*

This account examines mule-work up to the point of departure. There is scope to study the remaining part of the mules' journey: travelling on the aeroplane home, passing customs undetected and delivering the drugs to their contact. Professional mules discussed this briefly and it appears to be a potentially rich field. It may be possible to study this by interviewing experienced/professional mules or mules who successfully completed just one trip. Given my experience researching in prison I would suggest that both groups will be hard to reach.

There is scope to test some findings of this research with imprisoned mules elsewhere. In appendix 5, I discuss the possibility of a separate offence for drugs mules based in information about the nature of mule-work. The case would be strengthened considerably if research were to be based on a larger number of mules. Whilst an ethnographic approach may be helpful, it may not be necessary for testing the generalisability of my findings about how mule-work is organised. This research has found that asking about how mule-work was organised is possible through sensitive interviewing. This would allow for a much larger sample.

### *Women in 'hidden roles' in the cocaine trade*

I initially set out to research women's participation and role in the international cocaine trade, however this thesis is limited to an in depth examination of women in the role of drugs mules. Nonetheless, an important finding of this research is that women are involved in the international cocaine trade in a variety of roles not limited to mule-work. Some female respondents had worked in the cocaine trade in a variety of roles relating directly or indirectly to mule-work: this included recruiting and minding mules and working as contacts. Furthermore male respondents who considerable experience in the international and national cocaine trade reported that women could be found in a number of other

‘auxiliary’ roles: minding money or drugs, accounting, receiving packages, accompanying men as ‘covers’ as well as wholesalers or ‘middlemen’.

Future research on women in the drug trade should attempt to understand more about women in these ‘hidden’ roles. Although mules appear in high concentration in prisons, this research found that although some women were arrested as mules they had much broader experience. Nonetheless, as I described in Chapter 5, women who were still connected to the drug trade often had compelling reasons for not admitting to this experience publicly – either for fear of stigmatisation in prison or for fear of retribution from fellow drug traffickers. Although prison may not be the ideal place to recruit women from the drug trade, it is not impossible either. Whereas previous research with imprisoned mules has focussed on women’s reasons for working as a mule, this research has found that taking a broader, more exploratory style of interviewing (and particularly ethnographic interviewing) may be helpful in discovering more about women’s careers in the drug trade. This is a potentially rich avenue of research which is unexplored as yet.

#### *Gender and career progression in the drug trade*

During fieldwork I interviewed a small number of experienced female mules about their experiences: getting involved, the process of becoming ‘professional’, their reasons for diversification and their movements in and out of the drug trade over time. This data is yet to be properly analysed and written up. Nonetheless, there are a number of emergent findings worth briefly reporting. There is scope to explore how women progress in their careers in the drugs trade. Two women in this research had worked in a variety of roles in the drug trade. Interestingly, their career paths were not linear. One woman moved from local drug dealer, to recruiter, to mule, to recruiter and minder and back to drugs mule again. In contrast, some men reported a more linear format of career progression from mule, then reinvesting the capital gained to work independently or in small partnerships. Interestingly, one male and one female professional mule expressed no wish to move into another area of the drug trade but continued to work as drugs mules for many years. There may also be scope to understand how the local cocaine trade is related to the international cocaine trade through patterns of career development.

#### *Gender regime in the drug trade*

There is potential to examine gender roles and regimes within the international cocaine trade. Future research could consider the gender regime of the drugs trade, this might include sexism in the drugs trade (paying attention to national and international

contexts), the effect of gender on women's and men's progression and the role of violence on women's involvement in different roles in the drugs trade. Lastly, this research has focussed on the role of female gender in women's recruitment and participation in the drug trade. Men have been included in this research to a limited extent. Nonetheless, what has been presented shows that there is scope to explore the role of masculinities in the drug trade.

### *Sociological perspectives on the drug trade*

This research has shown that approaching the drug trade as a global-social phenomenon (rather than as transnational business or alien threat) does much to reveal how the business works.

Understanding the role of gender in the drug trade is one way into understanding other aspects which structure the drug trade including power and domination. Importantly though, studying women and men together does much to provide a picture of the international drug trade which reflects its complexity rather than seeks to iron it out as many 'business' accounts inevitably do.

### **After fieldwork; after prison**

Fieldwork ended in December 2006. Since then I have visited Ecuador twice and have kept in touch with respondents wherever possible.

### **Pardon and deportation**

‘At the end of 2008, about 1,500 persons who were in Ecuadorian prisons sentenced for drug trafficking were released.’ (Metaal and Edwards 2009: 1). The ‘pardon for drug mules’ was aimed at ‘micro-traffickers’: those arrested with 2 kilos or less of controlled substance (mainly cocaine), and in particular at drug mules. Whilst this ‘pardon’ also resulted in a large portion of drug users and street level dealers being freed (who were imprisoned under drug trafficking law), it also resulted in a large number of drug mules being released: this includes several respondents. After being pardoned, respondents were deported to their home country.

This pardon came too late for Frank: he died in prison following a long illness and insufficient medical care.

### **Parole**

Mules arrested with more than 2 kilos of drugs were not able to apply for this ‘pardon’ however all prisoners can apply for parole after completing half their sentence. Howard is currently on parole and enjoying life on the ‘outside’ again. Paula was on parole when I visited in 2007. She completed a degree through distance learning while in prison and now works in a University.

### **Finishing sentence and returning home**

Some respondents (particularly those who were in prison when I first visited in 2003) have since completed their sentence and returned to their home country. Graham now works in a restaurant kitchen: a career he began when he was on parole in Ecuador. Amanda returned to her home country and her four children who are now much older and wiser than when she left. She currently works in two jobs and is engaged to be married.

Paul finally returned home after spending two months waiting to be deported after his sentence. He lived in homeless accommodation for a year before being allocated government housing. As a result of being tortured by police and later being shot by prison guards he is unable to work. He enjoys seeing his children again and hopes to open a tattoo parlour.

## APPENDIX 1: Overview of existing published qualitative research on mules

Author	Date of data collection	Where was data collected	Number of respondents	Gender of respondents	Nationality of respondents
Green <sup>95</sup> (1991)	'early 1990's'	Prisons in England	25 depth interviews	Men and women	Nigerian.
Green (1998)	'early 1990's'	Prisons in England	70 'case studies' and biographical data from 900 'imprisoned drug importers and a range of secondary empirical resources'	Men and women	18 British 'couriers' Nigerian, Colombian, West Indian and Ghanaian
Dorado (1996) (2005)	1996-1998	Prisons in England, Spain and Germany	78 interviews	Women	Colombian
Campbell (2008)	15 years to present	Juárez cartel, Juárez/El Paso	Ethnographic research; 50 interviewees including traffickers, police officers, US border patrol agents, journalists and former participants in the drug trade.	31 women; 19 men.	Mexican
Huling (1995) (1996)	1995	Rikers Island, NYC.	6 case studies	Women	Various
Sudbury (2002)	1999-2001	Prisons in England, Canada and the US	50 interviews	Women	Data not provided. Analysis focuses on black women from Jamaica.
Sudbury (2005)	1999-2000	Prisons in England	24 taped interviews and discussions with more.	Women	Data not provided. Analysis focuses on black women from Jamaica.
Torres (2006) (2008)	2005	Prison in Ecuador	Ethnography of prison; 3 case studies of mules presented.	Women	Data not provided. Women are described as 'international'.
Zaitch (2002)	1996-1999	Holland and Colombia.	Ethnography and interviews. 191 respondents; 8 are 'drug couriers'; 25 are 'Colombian cocaine importers, distributors and retailers'.	Men and women. (Data not provided on proportion of men/women).	Colombian.

<sup>95</sup> Green also conducted quantitative research on almost 900 imprisoned 'couriers' from the UK, Nigeria, Jamaica, Colombian, Pakistan, Holland and other countries (1991: 5).

*International research on women mules omitted*

One study has been regrettably omitted from this study: 'Latijnsamerikaanse drugkoeriersters in detentie: ezels of zondebokken?' ('Latin American drug couriers in detention: mules or scapegoats?') (Janssen 1994) . Janssen conducted research with Latin-American drug couriers in a women's prison in Holland. Unfortunately her book is only available in Dutch and I have been unable to contact the author.

## **APPENDIX 2: Legal status of data: confidentiality, data collection, writing-up and disseminating findings**

Taylor identifies a triad of risks to the researcher: legal, health and personal (1993: 17). This project was shaped by legal/ethical concerns posed by researching an illegal phenomenon. This appendix describes how ‘legal risks’ shaped this research project through planning, conducting and writing up research.

Although researching criminals has always been risky (see for example Polsky 1985). Ethical Review Boards have become increasingly risk aware (Haggerty 2004). Researchers at the University of Melbourne had their research project (into hallucinogenic drug users) suspended by the Ethical Review Board after it was found that police could use researchers notes and records (including consent forms) for criminal investigations (Fitzgerald and Hamilton 1996).

Researching illegal activity carries the inherent likelihood of collecting ‘dirty knowledge’ about past, present or future crimes (Lee 1993). The main danger of having this knowledge, is of being asked to provide information about respondents to be police, or even being asked to testify against respondents (Scarce 1994; Tunnell 1998).

### **Legal risk to data: confidentiality**

The possibility that interview data could be taken and used as evidence in court against respondents was a serious one with implications for confidentiality, respondents’ (and the researcher’s safety).

Despite ethical guidelines designed to protect respondents<sup>96</sup> there exist no legal sanctions to protect respondents confidentiality in the UK. Coomber warns that ‘any research material and/or data carried out on those involved in criminal activities here in the UK is potentially subject to seizure and researchers to be summoned. [...] You and your data could be used to investigate and/or prosecute those participating in your research’ (2002).

In order to evaluate the legal concerns (in line with ethical responsibilities<sup>97</sup>), I sought legal advice from lawyers in Ecuador and the UK prior to beginning fieldwork<sup>98</sup>. In

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<sup>96</sup> ‘Researchers should not breach the ‘duty of confidentiality’ and not pass on identifiable data to third parties without participants’ consent’ BSC 2003 ‘Code of ethics for researchers in the field of criminology’: The British Society of Criminology..

<sup>97</sup> It is, therefore, incumbent upon members to be aware of the possible consequences of their work. Wherever possible they should attempt to anticipate and to guard against, consequences for research participants that can be predicted to be harmful. Members are not absolved from this responsibility by the consent given by research participants. (BSA 2002, no. 26).



sum, there are no legal guarantees of confidentiality either in the UK or Ecuador however the situation is not as bleak as Coomber contends.

### **Scotland**

I received legal advice from Roy Shearer of Lindsay WS Solicitors, Edinburgh.

Legal procedures exist (equivalent to a court subpoena in England) by which data can be sequestered (either at the legal request of the UK or Ecuadorian police or prosecution). Similarly, police in the UK could (and can) apply for access to interview transcripts and field notes and can ask me to testify if they strongly believe I have information connected to a current court action in the UK. If I fail to co-operate I could be charged with obstructing justice.

More optimistically though: ‘the authorities cannot require you to provide information unless it is thought that that information would be relevant in relation to a pending court action, either criminal or civil. The authorities generally cannot fish for information which they might like to have.’

So, although Coomber claims that research data could be used to ‘investigate’ respondents’ illegal activities, legal proceedings cannot be set in motion to access research data unless it is likely that the researcher has information relating to court proceedings.

### **Ecuador**

I spoke to Dr Carlos Serran in Quito about legal procedures in Ecuador. Now that I am in the UK, I cannot be compelled to travel to Ecuador to testify. While I was on fieldwork, there was a possibility that the police or the courts could ask me to testify against a case in progress if they had reason to believe I had evidence. As in the UK, the authorities cannot simply ‘fish’ for information.

### **Research design and data collection**

Given that there was no concrete basis on which to guarantee confidentiality, the project was designed to avoid collecting information which might be risky. This was done in collaboration with respondents. All were made aware that I could not guarantee confidentiality however I explained how data would be ‘disutilised’ after interview.

Firstly, data collection was designed to produce data that would be useful for academic research but of limited use in legal settings. The first precaution taken was to only

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<sup>98</sup> Thanks to Roy Shearer, Solicitor, Lindsays WS, Edinburgh and Carlos Alberto Serrán, Lawyer, Quito.

interview inmates who had already been sentenced. This did much to avoid inadvertently collecting information about trials in progress. Next, interviews were designed and conducted to avoid collecting 'dirty knowledge' about trafficking: first by informing respondents about the limits on confidentiality and secondly by designing interviews to elicit academically useful (and legally uninteresting) data. Data was collected specifically on respondents' experiences, with a particular focus on the role of gender. Despite the narrow focus, interviews elicited a wide variety of types of data: from 'facts' of how cocaine trafficking works, to personal 'truths' about career and self. During interviews, I frequently prompted respondents not to give me details. I also made a show of not writing down these details and instead coding them in my notes. Typically, this involved using symbols instead of names.

Once outside prison, data was further 'disutilised' during transcription where identifying information, names, places and dates were all extracted. All interviews were transcribed within 2 weeks and all tapes were destroyed. Interviews with career traffickers were recorded with pen and paper to avoid any association with the police and suspicion of being a spy (see Lee 1993) and were stripped of identifying details at the point of interview. This was transcribed immediately and paper copies were securely destroyed. All interview data was kept securely stored and password protected. The resulting document included no names, dates or identifying details. Rarely information was not transcribed.

## **Writing**

The decision was made prior to data collection that pseudonyms would be used. Where information about places has been used, this has been negotiated with respondents. During fieldwork I wrote up parts of interviews, or anecdotes I heard in conversation to show how they would be presented to ensure that consent was informed. Specifically, I have shown Paula and Amanda the extended sections I have written about their experiences and asked for their permission to publish what I had written. Both agreed.

After fieldwork, it became apparent that some respondents have trials pending. This data could not be included directly in the write up (although it informs my background analysis).

## **Disseminating findings**

Clarification should also be given to research participants regarding the degree to which they will be consulted prior to publication. Where possible, participants should be offered feedback on findings, for example in the form of a summary report. (BSA 2002, no. 24)

In November 2007, I returned to Quito with an initial summary of findings. This version was fairly short and was a non-academic account of the main findings of my thesis. Regrettably I had to omit respondents' words to avoid breaching confidentiality. Respondents who read it mainly commented that it was 'good'. None had concerns about confidentiality after reading this. One former drugs mule commented that she hoped it would give context to her short experience as a mule as she had understood so little about the wider circumstances in which she was involved.

## **Status of final thesis**

'Members should be aware that they have some responsibility for the use to which their data may be put and for how the research is to be disseminated. Discharging that responsibility may on occasion be difficult, especially in situations of social conflict, competing social interests or where there is unanticipated misuse of the research by third parties' (BSA 2002: no.12).

Whilst there is a professional and political onus to publish and make research findings public, this will only be done when it is ethically satisfactory to do so, i.e. data no longer presents a risk to the well being of individual respondents. Although all efforts will be made to anonymise respondents and research site, it is virtually impossible to eliminate the risk of deductive breach of confidentiality.

Initially, I plan to embargo my thesis for a year whilst there are still charges and appeals pending against some respondents. Appendices three and four will not be included in the final thesis to be stored in the library but have been included for the examiner's information.

## APPENDIX 3: Implications for policy: sentencing by weight and deterrent sentencing<sup>99</sup>

Sentencing and imprisonment of drug mules was the subject of debate in the media in the 1990's (Green et al. 1994: 479). Eleven years ago, *Drugs, trafficking and criminal policy: the scapegoat strategy* (1998) offered a comprehensive critique of drug trafficking policy in the UK.

This thesis was not researched or written with policy implications in mind, nonetheless this research has learnt much about the work which mules do. Knowing how drug trafficking works may be useful to develop sentencing policies which are effective and humane. The subject of drug trafficking sentencing policy is extensive and can only be afforded a brief treatment here. This section examines the implications of this research for drug policy in England and Wales and the United States of America<sup>100</sup>.

### Sentencing by weight and by class/schedule

In the USA and England and Wales, sentences for drug trafficking are based on the weight and drug trafficked. In the USA, drug trafficking is subject to mandatory minimum sentences set out in Federal Law according to the 'schedule'<sup>101</sup> and weight of the drug (United States Department of Justice 2009). Similarly in England and Wales, the weight and class<sup>102</sup> of the drug are central to sentencing guidelines (Harper, et al. 2000; Sentencing Guidelines Council 2005). Importantly, the consideration of mitigating circumstances is explicitly ruled out (Green 1998b: 11).

Sentencing policies in both countries are underpinned by an assumption that grading sentencing in this way punishes the larger scale offender more since they would presumably be arrested with greater quantities of drugs. In contrast, this research finds that drug mules may be carrying larger quantities and/or drugs of a higher class than 'large scale' traffickers

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<sup>99</sup> After the thesis was submitted the Sentence Advisory Panel published a public consultation paper on sentencing for drug offences. A formal reply was drafted by the author based on this appendix. For a copy of this response please contact the author directly: [jennifer.fleetwood@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.fleetwood@gmail.com)  
**Sentence Advisory Panel** 2009 'Consultation paper on sentencing for drug offences', London: Sentence Advisory Panel.

<sup>100</sup> These legal jurisdictions have been chosen because of their size and relevance to the research. The reader should note that sentencing practice in Scotland is broadly similar to that of England and Wales. The sentencing model employed by the USA is relevant since they are influential in South and Latin American drug policy.

<sup>101</sup> Drugs are categorised into schedules I-V, schedule I being the highest classification.

<sup>102</sup> Drugs are categorised into 3 classes, A, B and C, class A being the highest.

who work for themselves (and thus profit more from trafficking). I concur with Green: 'Couriers, it seems, are being held responsible for decisions, circumstances and issues outside their knowledge, experience and control' (Green 1998: 9).

Mule-work is organised in a way which affords the mule very little control over what or how much drug they are carrying. Contacts determined the amount and drug to be smuggled; drug mules had little say about how much or what they carried. Furthermore, since drugs arrived pre-packed in all methods of smuggling (capsules, concealed in clothes or in luggage), mules could not confirm they were carrying what they had agreed. As a result, this research found that several mules were carrying more than they had agreed to; some others were carrying a different drug. One mule had agreed to carry 2 kilos of heroin and discovered that he was carrying an additional 3 kilos of heroin. Although cocaine and heroin are the same class of drug in the UK, in the USA the mandatory minimum sentence for heroin is double that of cocaine (see the tables below for more information).

Conversely, those traffickers who work for themselves (or in collaboration with others in small-scale partnerships) are much better informed and have more control over their work. I interviewed several traffickers about how they decided how much drugs to carry. Their replies variously focussed on how much money they could invest and how much risk they were willing to take. A larger quantity of drugs would require greater investment, carry a longer sentence and would also be harder to successfully conceal. Independent entrepreneurs tended to carry relatively small weights which could be concealed in low technology methods such as 400g in a talc bottle, or a kilo swallowed in capsules. In contrast, drug trafficking organisations (who employ mules) required to make a larger profit and had greater resources to invest. The largest trafficking operation in this study (which sent mules regularly) invested in expensive chemical camouflage methods of concealment and accordingly mules carried a large amount of 3-5 kilos. Thus, mules employed by trafficking organisations are more likely to carry large amounts of drugs than those traffickers who carry their own drugs. Furthermore, the amount carried may be informed by sentencing guidelines. Research with traffickers (in organisational roles) showed that about a third knew what sentence they would receive if they were arrested (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007: 49). Thus, it seems likely that they would be aware of 'borderline' quantities. In the US and the UK a 2 level tariff applies:

<b>USA</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Mandatory minimum sentence</b>
Heroin (Schedule I)	100-999 grams	Not less than 5 years (first offence)
Cocaine (schedule II)	500-4999 grams	
Heroin (Schedule I)	1 kilo or more	Not less than 10 years (first offence)
Cocaine (schedule II)	5 kilos or more	

*Penalties for trafficking in the USA.*

Adapted from United States Department of Justice (2009).

<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Sentence guidelines</b>
Heroin and cocaine (Both class A)	500g or more	10 years imprisonment upwards
Heroin and cocaine (Both class A)	5 kilos or more	14 years imprisonment upwards

*Penalties for trafficking in England and Wales.*

*Adapted from Sentencing Guidelines Council (2005: 58).*

Those traffickers who were carrying their own drugs were more likely to know these regulations and be in a position to tailor what they are carrying accordingly. In contrast, mules were rarely in the position to have this knowledge or the resources to negotiate how much or what they would carry. Thus, this research suggests that sentencing those people arrested at international borders with kilo quantities of drugs according to weight may disproportionately punish mules.

### **Deterrent sentencing**

Current sentencing policies in the USA and the UK are underpinned by a guiding principle of deterrence (see Heaven and Hudson, no date). The Sentence Guidelines Council explicitly states: ‘anything that courts can do by way of deterrent sentences on those found guilty of crime involving Class A drugs should be done’ (2005: 54). The assumption is that harsh punishments will discourage traffickers from operating in the country where these sentences are set.

This research found that no drug mules knew what sentences they would face if they were arrested. Mules relied on their contacts for information about sentences. They were frightened to ask for outside advice and few could think of anyone they could have asked for reliable, informed advice). Many mules did ask their contacts what punishment they would receive and expected sentences of only a couple of years. Some were told that they would not go to prison at all and were reassured that their contact (often a close friend) would pay

for a lawyer to ensure that they would be released promptly. In contrast, only traffickers in organisational roles were aware of punishments. This echoes research on drug traffickers in the UK (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007: 49).

This research provides evidence in support of public education campaigns to inform potential mules of the long sentences which they face. Hibiscus have been involved in campaigning in these countries to increase awareness in Jamaica and Trinidad (Hibiscus 2002), Nigeria (Bola gets rich quick) and Ghana (Maame goes to London)<sup>103</sup>. Educational/preventative policies appear to have a positive effect (Heaven and Hudson, no date).

### **A separate offence for drug mules**

The British legal charity 'Release' is currently campaigning for a separate legal offence for drugs mules<sup>104</sup>.

There is an urgent need to adopt pragmatic solutions to the challenge of sentencing and imprisoning an increasing population of drug mules. Current policies have been criticised elsewhere (Heaven 1996; Heaven and Hudson no date; Hedge and Tarzi 1996; Sudbury 2002). In sum, long sentences are costly to manage, inefficient and (as this thesis shows) do not reflect the non-violent nature of the crime. Furthermore, long sentences for drug traffickers exacerbate prison overcrowding in England and Wales (Hedge and Tarzi 1996; Joseph 2006) in Australia (Easteal 1993), Ecuador (Edwards 2003), Mexico and Latin America (Bergman and Azaola 2007) and across the globe. Imprisoning women far from their children has serious long term effects (Heaven 1996).

If the proposition of a separate charge for being a drugs mule is to be taken seriously, it must take into account not only those high profile cases where mules were apparently victimised by 'evil drug traffickers' but also take seriously those who knowingly chose to work as a courier (see Green 1998: 76). Furthermore, it must be based on evidence about the nature of the crime. This research offers a number of suggestions for the separate offence for drugs mules. It should:

- be available to men and women arrested at international borders with cocaine, heroin or other controlled/illegal substances.

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103 Descriptions of these projects can be found on the Hibiscus website: <http://www.hibiscuslondon.org.uk/eva.htm> accessed 17th February 2009.

104 See: <http://www.release.org.uk/campaigns/current-campaigns/women-in-prison-drug-mules> accessed 19th February, 2009.

- not apply to those with previous offences for drug trafficking anywhere in the world
- sentence length should not be calculated on weight or class of drug.
- not take into account mitigating circumstances given that the practicalities of providing evidence to support such claims move the burden of proof to the defendant<sup>105</sup>.
- not require that the defendant provide information on who they were working for given that mules are often subject to violent threats and retributions towards family members if they are seen to provide evidence about their contacts.
- have a lower penalty reflecting the fact that the majority of drug mules are non-violent offenders, the fact that deterrent sentencing is inappropriate for drug mules and that there is no provision for parole for foreign national prisoners which effectively doubles their sentence.
- the defendant should not pay for their own deportation or be charged a fine in recognition of the fact that some drug mules do not work for money but to pay off debts which are their own or others and that some mules are subject to violent threat.

A number of other creative alternatives may be worth consideration. For example, penalties for working as a drug mule could:

- include a lifetime ban from the UK after deportation from the UK where the defendant does not have British citizenship. A similar system operates in Ecuador. Where the defendant is from the UK, a condition of their parole will be that they do not travel abroad.
- incorporate provisions for quick deportation in recognition of the fact that many of those inmates sentenced for drug trafficking are foreign nationals and that the cost of deportation is significantly less than imprisonment and in recognition of the social harm caused by imprisoning women (and men) far from home.
- where a large number of drug mules are being deported to one country (for example to Jamaica), the UK should fund criminal justice and rehabilitation programs in that country to avoid further 'exportation of justice' and avoid potential human rights abuses.

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<sup>105</sup> See Edwards (2003) for a description of how the burden of proof of innocence has become institutionalised practice in courts in Ecuador.



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