

**Sourcing illegal drugs as a hidden older user: the ideal of  
'social supply'**

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# **Sourcing illegal drugs as a hidden older user: The ideal of ‘social supply’**

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# **Sourcing illegal drugs as a hidden older user: The ideal of ‘social supply’**

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## **Word count**

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## **Abstract**

*Aims:* At a time of growing awareness regarding the non-commercial supply of illegal drugs between friends, this article explores the significance of so-called ‘social supply’ for a group of ‘hidden’ users of illegal drugs aged 40 and over.

*Methodology:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 users of illegal drugs aged 40 and over who were not in contact with the criminal justice system or treatment agencies regarding their use. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling.

*Findings:* Accessing drugs through the commercial market was considered a less attractive proposition than social supply by the participants. The majority used only socially supplied drugs, with some engaging commercial dealers when socially supplied product was unavailable. A handful sourced drugs exclusively through the commercial market. Some were home growers of cannabis, and a small number had drifted into social supply themselves.

*Conclusions:* Social supply was seen in a far more favourable light than commercial transactions by our participants, and acted as an ideal against which all other acts of sourcing were compared. Moreover, social supply was often an integral facet of the drug using experience and served to validate and enhance that experience. The relatively benign, non-predatory nature of the social supply engaged in by the participants lends support to calls for some reform of the offence of supply in UK law.

## **Sourcing illegal drugs as a hidden older user: The ideal of ‘social supply’**

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### **Introduction**

Over recent years there has been an increasing recognition that the ‘drug market’ is not a singular, monolithic entity. Whilst in the popular imagination drug markets tend to be somewhat homogenised and drug dealers are often demonised (Coomber, 2006; Coomber, 2010), a growing body of research is building a picture of markets that vary over time, space and circumstances (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that some drug markets, such as the market for cannabis among young people in the UK, operate as relatively distinct ‘arenas of transaction’ (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) that are largely separate from wider commercial drug markets.

This is so-called ‘social supply’. Although there is no agreed definition of this phenomenon (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007: 861), it is generally regarded as the non-commercial supply of ‘soft’ drugs between friends or through social networks; in Potter’s words, social supply refers to the act of ‘supplying friends, where profit is not the primary motive’ (Potter, 2009: 58). Such transactions are often seen as acts of ‘friendship and trust’ (Taylor and Potter, 2013). Of course, this raises many questions, such as who should be considered as ‘friends’ and what is meant by ‘non-commercial’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2014), and of course commercial markets do continue to exist and thrive in certain contexts (Acum and Treadwell, 2017). However, the fact that something akin to social supply exists and is often predominant in particular settings is no longer in question. Indeed, Coomber, Moyle and South (2016) have characterised social supply as the ‘other side’ of drug normalisation,

routine and unremarkable and, in some cases even where large amounts of drugs and money are concerned, not considered to be ‘proper’ dealing by those involved.

Social supply is not recognised as a lesser supply offence by current legislation in the UK. This is because different motivations are not taken into account in the definition of the offence of supply as per section 4 of The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. As a result, the lack of profit motivation that characterises social supply transactions is irrelevant. This has led Coomber and Moyle (2014) to suggest that the stereotypical view of the ‘evil dealer’ is thus enshrined in legislation. However, the motivation behind supply acts *can* be of relevance during sentencing (Taylor and Potter, 2013), and there are signs that the criminal justice system is increasingly acknowledging that social supply is qualitatively different from drug dealing ‘proper’ even in the absence of the creation a new offence category (Moyle, Coomber and Lowther, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, some commentators have suggested that there is a need for more radical changes to the law. Many have argued that social supply should be considered as a separate category of ‘dealing’ which warrants a less punitive CJS response (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007; Taylor and Potter, 2013; Moyle, Coomber and Lowther, 2013). Coomber and Moyle (2014) propose the creation of an offence of ‘minimally commercial supply’, which would extend the concept of social supply in order to accommodate the real circumstances of most supply transactions where a small gain may be realised even though this is not the primary motivation. This would cover, for instance, user-dealers of heroin who seek to secure their own supplies through the non-predatory sale of drugs to other addicts known to them for a small profit.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time as awareness of social supply has risen, so the sense that many individuals use illegal drugs ‘normally’ (Hammersley, 2005 and 2011) has also increased. ‘Normal’ drug use is use which is generally integrated sustainably into otherwise conventional lifestyles

alongside work, occupational careers, family and the like. Many normal users of illegal drugs are effectively ‘hidden’; that is, they remain under the radar of the criminal justice system and treatment agencies.<sup>3</sup>

There is also now a burgeoning interest in the illegal drug use of older adults and so-called ‘baby boomers’ both in popular discourse (Redback Films, 2005; Kluger and Ressler, 2006; Hooton, 2014; Davis, 2017) and in the academy, where in addition to research on the extent of such use (Williams and Askew, 2016) particular attention has been directed to ‘normal’ use (Pearson, 2001), ‘hidden’ use (Moxon and Waters, 2017), ‘non-problematic’ use (Notley, 2005), cannabis use (Chatwin and Porteous, 2013; Black and Joseph, 2014; Choi, DiNitto, and Nathan Marti, 2016a and 2016b; Han et al., 2017; Salas-Wright et al., 2017), the heavy use of heroin, cocaine, crack and methamphetamine (Boeri, 2018), users who inject (Anderson and Levy, 2003; Levy and Anderson, 2005; Hammersley and Dalgarno, 2013) and the means by which older adults legitimise so-called ‘recreational’ use (Askew, 2016). This growing body of work is serving as a long overdue corrective to the dearth of knowledge regarding older users that characterised previous decades and was perhaps influenced by the ‘maturation hypothesis’ (Winick, 1962) which suggested that younger people ‘mature out’ of drug use as they age.

With these trends in mind, this article will explore the significance of social supply for a group of hidden users of illegal drugs aged 40 and over. There is already some evidence that social supply is especially prevalent among older illegal drug using adults. For instance, the 2013-14 run of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Home Office, 2014) found that 62% of 45–59 year olds sourced their drugs from a family member or ‘someone else well known’ to them, compared with 59% of 16–24 year olds. Just 5% of 45–59 year olds used ‘a dealer not known to [them] personally’, compared to 8% of 16–24 year olds and 9% of 30–34

year olds. Meanwhile, 62% of 45–59 year olds obtained their last illegal drugs either at their or someone else’s home, compared to 49% of 16–24 year olds and 43% of 25–29 year olds. The younger cohorts were more likely to obtain drugs in locations outside of the private home, such as in bars, pubs, clubs or outdoors. Such tendencies do not seem to be confined to the UK. For instance, Hathaway’s study of middle class adult Canadian users found that they wished to avoid ‘impersonal transactions with professional drug dealers’ wherever possible (1997: 118). Coomber and Moyle (2014: 161) have suggested that as the drug using population ages there is a risk of disproportionate treatment for older users because those who are involved in social supply activities, such as ageing user dealers, risk prosecution for supply offences under existing legislation.

The individuals who participated in this research proved to be especially revealing about the attractions of social supply. They were keen to remain beyond the purview of the authorities, and they were not otherwise criminal. They combined their drug use with a range of other pursuits, such as employment, studying, raising a family and so on. As such, they were just the type of group for whom social supply offered distinct advantages over the commercial market. Indeed, they demonstrated a clear preference for social supply and most were able to access illegal drugs in this way all, or at least some, of the time. Most were very keen to extol the virtues of socially supplied product, even where they did not conceive of it in these terms. A number even engaged in some limited social supply activities themselves. The results section, which follows some notes on methodology, will detail these findings. We will go on to make two further suggestions in the discussion section. Firstly, we will argue that not only was social supply the most common method by which our participants sourced their drugs, but that it also formed something of a measuring rod against which all other acts of sourcing were compared. Social supply offered a number of advantages over more nakedly commercial

transactions and, as such, when drugs were accessed through more commercial means, these transactions were rated against the benchmark provided by social supply. Thus, for our older hidden users social supply was not simply a means of acquiring drugs, but an *ideal* which shaped their response to all acts of drug sourcing. Secondly, and following on from this, we will suggest that social supply was often an integral facet of the drug using experience and served to validate and enhance that experience. Among our sample, social supply functioned as an important contributory factor to the overall *gestalt* of illegal drug use.

The significance of these arguments lies in how they suggest that existing understandings of social supply are ripe for further development, particularly in terms of how social supply is viewed by those who engage it in routinely. Whilst it is already widely accepted that in certain contexts social supply is the predominant means of acquiring drugs, the findings detailed here suggest that social supply can also be particularly important in the way that it bestows meaning upon acts of drug sourcing and use. In addition, these arguments also contribute to the growing knowledge of a hitherto rarely studied group – hidden older illegal drug users – who are likely to become increasingly prominent in the coming years (Williams and Askew, 2016; Moxon and Waters, 2017), and they raise important questions regarding the extant legislation on supply in the UK and, by extension, in other jurisdictions, which will be detailed in the conclusion.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on empirical data generated by a wider study of past-year users of illegal drugs aged 40 and over who are ‘hidden’; that is, not in contact with the criminal justice system or treatment agencies regarding their use. By targeting hidden older users, the study aimed to develop knowledge of ‘normal’ drug use and the ebbs and flows of ‘drug careers’ (Murphy, Reinerman and Waldorf, 1989; Faupel, 1991) over time, something largely ignored



in previous work on illegal drug use. One of the starkest findings of the study was the extent to which the participants favoured social supply as their means of sourcing illegal drugs, and the positive attitudes they held towards it (Waters, 2009; Moxon and Waters, 2017).

Accessing a community-based sample of individuals who were 'hidden by choice' (Noy, 2008: 331) proved challenging. With various friends and colleagues acting as initial contact points, recruitment was conducted via snowball sampling, generally regarded as a technique capable of facilitating the study of difficult to reach populations (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). However, construction of the sample in this case was far from straightforward as, among other things, potential participants were extremely reluctant to speak about their engagement in an illegal activity, and the connections between hidden older users were often slight which hampered the development of sampling chains (Waters, 2015). In the absence of viable alternative sampling strategies, a somewhat arduous research process (Moxon and Waters, 2017) eventually yielded a sample of thirty participants with an age range of 40-66 years.

The research instrument was a semi-structured 'life story' interview, loosely based on the work of McAdams (1993), which detailed the drug career and current use patterns of the participants. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study and the fact that participants would be met on just a single occasion, it was felt that this would be the most efficient way of obtaining detailed, rich information that would allow for the construction of the "thick" type of knowledge [...] that is so valued in the qualitative social sciences' (Noy, 2008: 334). As part of the interview, participants were asked to discuss how they sourced illegal drugs, both now and in the past. Their feelings and attitudes towards different means of acquisition were also explored. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed, with coding carried out by hand to ensure an intimate knowledge of the data. Ethical considerations were clearly of great importance given the sensitive and illegal nature of the topic at hand.

Informed consent was always sought, significant measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and, as far as possible, anonymity, and participants could decline to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with.

## **Results**

Table 1 sets out some basic details of the sample, including how they obtained their current illegal drugs of choice. The sample had a mean average age of 48.8 years. 17 participants were in their 40s, 10 were in their 50s, and three were in their 60s. Five females were interviewed, as compared to twenty-five males; clearly this is an imbalance and findings should be read in this light.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, there was little ethnic diversity among the participants, with all of the interviewees identifying themselves as white. The vast majority (26) identified as ‘white British’; two participants identified as ‘white Irish’ and two as ‘white other’ (that is, non-British or Irish). A wide variety of occupations was represented.<sup>5</sup> Participants resided in England, Scotland and Wales.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Thirteen of our sample of thirty hidden older illegal drug users accessed illegal drugs through social supply alone. Six participants used socially supplied product whenever possible but would turn to commercial dealers when necessary. Six participants were home growers of cannabis; of these six, two used socially supplied drugs in addition to their own home-grown product, whilst four used their own home-grown product alone. Five participants sourced their illegal drugs exclusively through the commercial market. Thus, in total, nineteen of the thirty participants had no contact whatsoever with commercial dealers, and a further six only had such contact when all other options were exhausted.

### ***Accessing illegal drugs solely through social supply***

Thirteen participants accessed illegal drugs through social supply alone. In most cases they secured their supplies through friends and relatives and, as far as they were aware, no profit was made on these transactions. Typical among those who accessed drugs through social supply channels were Ned (53, unemployed, amphetamine user), who acquired his drugs through ‘a friend of mine’, Ollie (52, company owner, cannabis and occasionally cocaine user), who obtained supplies from ‘my daughter's boyfriend mostly’, and Zach (66, retired fitter, cannabis user) who bought ‘from a fellow across the road’. Often the provenance of the supplied drugs was not clear. For example Derek (50, gardener, cannabis and occasionally mushroom user) spoke of how ‘I've got a friend who can get, I don't know where from, but he gets it, he quite easily gets what he wants and he asks me if I want some as well and if I do then he'll get more and bring it round’.

In many cases our participants benefitted from the services of more than one social supplier. Liam (45, unemployed, cannabis user), for example, spoke of how he secured his supplies ‘from friends. [...] I've got one friend who's done some gardening [for me] and [is willing] to fill my medicine chest so to speak, if I ask. I've got another one that is a bit obsessive and he goes around trying to find the best strains he can so I'll get from him and I've got another mate that has at least one “farmer” and two dealers on his street’.

In the overwhelming majority of cases social supply arrangements such as these tended to be long standing, as in the case of Winston (58, academic, cannabis user): ‘[I get it] from friends, it's always been [...] through friends. [...] Never random, never random, never ever bought any off somebody I didn't know. [...] Sometimes long-term friends who are back where I used to live for nearly 30 years [...], you know, they bring some down if I ever needed any. It's always been that, it's always been that.’

A number of participants enjoyed access to socially supplied home-grown cannabis produced by friends and acquaintances. Keith (63, retired civil servant, cannabis user), for example, had been introduced to a home-grower who socially supplied a select group of clients about five years previously. He had been invited to purchase and now fulfilled his needs through this individual who, according to Keith, took great care in producing high quality strains.

### ***Accessing illegal drugs through both social supply and commercial means***

In addition to the thirteen participants who exclusively used socially supplied illegal drugs, a further six participants preferred to use social suppliers but also used commercial dealers when necessary. These participants either only had intermittent access to socially supplied drugs, or else sometimes had specific requirements that they were unable to service through social supply channels. As Xavier (55, researcher, polydrug user) put it, there was often a need to use ‘different dealers for different drugs’. In all these cases, engagement with commercial markets and dealers was undertaken with some reluctance and was generally seen as a ‘last option’ (Nathan, 47, unemployed customs officer due to disability, cannabis user).

Malcolm’s (44, student, cannabis user) approach was typical of this group. As noted above, he enjoyed access to a friend’s home-grown cannabis and was able to buy in bulk from him, but when this option was unavailable for whatever reason then he would engage the services of a commercial dealer, a ‘local lad [that] I know’. The same applied to Uri (47, care worker, cannabis user), who usually had access to cannabis grown by his friends and relatives. When he was unable to obtain drugs in this way he secured supplies from a trusted commercial dealer who he had used for around a decade. Similar arrangements were enjoyed by Eric (40, consultant for relocation firm, cannabis user) who described his two dealers thus: ‘One is very much a business, one is very much a friend’. As with the rest of the participants in this group,

Malcolm, Uri and Eric always looked to social supply in the first instance and only turned to commercial dealers when they were otherwise unable to satisfy their wants.

### *Accessing illegal drugs solely through commercial means*

Five participants were unable to access socially supplied drugs, and their supplies were sourced exclusively through the commercial market. These participants, like those who resorted to commercial dealers when socially supplied product was unavailable, had usually known their dealers over a lengthy period. In most cases there was fairly strong evidence that the values of ‘friendship’ and ‘trust’ normally associated more readily with social supply were present in commercial transactions; this echoes the work of Taylor and Potter (2013) who found that many commercial dealers had often drifted into ‘real’ dealing from backgrounds in social supply, but retained their social supply values as they made the transition.

Participants spoke of the construction of long-term relationships with their dealer and the sense of friendship they felt. Some told of how they regularly invited their dealer into their home and shared conversation and a drink with them, rather than merely coldly conducting their transaction. Others pointed out that their dealer allowed them to purchase their drugs on credit if finances were tight. For example, Pat (51, unemployed, polydrug user) described her current financial difficulties and how her dealer was relaxed about the situation. She stated that ‘it’s going to be right difficult this week, but she does wait and even if we owe her, she’ll still lay us on because she knows she gets the money eventually’. Indeed, some participants were quite vocal in support of their own dealers. Colin (41, internet entrepreneur, cannabis and occasionally other drug user), for instance, who used the services of several commercial dealers, was keen to point out that ‘they are very nice people and I hate the demonisation of them’.

Nevertheless, vigilance was exercised when commercial dealers were engaged. Xavier (55, researcher, polydrug user) suggested that ‘the older generation like me are much more cautious’ when venturing into the commercial market. Even among those who used commercial dealers exclusively, there was a general reluctance to engage with dealers who were unknown to them. Some suggested that they would simply quit if they could no longer access drugs through their regular dealer. Lenny (53, mechanic, cannabis user), for instance, was reluctant to consider the possibility of using a dealer other than his regular, trusted one: ‘I don’t know, I suppose if he couldn’t, and I couldn’t get any, I would just fucking knock it on the head I suppose.’ Similarly, Uri (47, care worker, cannabis user) told us that ‘if it wasn’t around, I wouldn’t go out of my way to look for it, I wouldn’t make special arrangements. Actually, I’ve had the same dealer for, gee, 10 years’.

In a very few instances there were circumstances in which participants were prepared to use commercial dealers who were strangers to them. Xavier (55, researcher, polydrug user), who had access to social supply and commercial dealers with whom he had longstanding relationships, occasionally also used dealers who were ‘just kind of money making scallies who just deliver to the door. You know I don’t know who they are, you just pick the number up off someone, they’ll deliver to anyone, they don’t give a shit who you are.’ He generally only engaged these dealers when seeking out drugs that his other suppliers could not provide at all or else in a timely enough manner.

### ***Home-growing***

Six participants grew their own supplies of cannabis. Of these six, two also used socially supplied drugs, whilst four consumed only their own home-grown product. None of the home-growers engaged with commercial dealers.

A number of reasons for home-growing were given. For some, it was undertaken in order to guarantee supply, secure access to a particular strain (sometimes for so called ‘medical’ use) or ensure quality. For others, it was an important part of the strategy of avoiding contact with commercial dealers. As Oscar (40, volunteer, cannabis user) put it, ‘I make my own so I don't have to associate with dealers. [...] Yeah, that’s the sole reason, yeah. It’s not, [...] it was never going to make money, it was just so I don’t have to associate with [dealers]. I’ve never sold any of it in the whole time I’ve done it. I smoked every single bit, much to the annoyance of friends!’

More often than not, it was a combination of all or at least some of these reasons that made home-grow an attractive option for our participants. Vince (42, academic, cannabis user) explained this particularly concisely: ‘You know I grow it myself. I don’t buy it from anywhere else, because I’m not particularly interested in engaging with any of that, those scenes, if you like. And also I don’t like the products, that’s the other thing, you know, a lot of the things that people sell are not all that good or they’re kind of these super sort of hybrids and all that, which I don’t like. So, I kind of pretty much control the whole thing’. For Vince, there was also enjoyment to be had in the actual process of cultivation itself, something that has been noted before in previous research (Hakkarainen & Perala, 2011; Potter et al., 2015). As he put it, ‘I am a bit of a gardener, so for me [...] the activity itself is almost as enjoyable as the end product actually. You know, sort of the planting and the growing and all the rest of it. [...] I've always quite enjoyed the process of growing it. It’s actually quite a difficult thing to do, to do it properly. So that’s kind of an interesting challenge’.

One participant, Nathan (47, unemployed customs officer due to disability, cannabis user), was part of a group who ‘clubbed together’ to buy seeds and took turns at growing. This arrangement operated as something of an informal, small scale ‘cannabis social club’ of the

kind that is becoming increasingly prevalent, especially around certain areas of Europe (Arana and Montanes Sanchez, 2011).

Without exception, great care was exercised by the home-growers in our sample to conceal their activities. Participants talked of awkward situations when visitors and tradespeople were in their home; Nathan (47, unemployed customs officer due to disability, cannabis user) had been suspended from a previous job and received a police caution after a neighbour tipped off the police about his modest home-grow operation. Indeed some participants, such as Yannis (47, regional manager, cannabis user), had been inclined to try home-growing but had decided against doing so due to the threat of legal repercussions.

### *Drifting into supply*

Four of the participants had engaged in some limited social supply activities themselves. Generally, this involved passing small amounts of drugs (which had been socially supplied to our participants in the first place, or else home-grown) on to their friends and fellow users for free or at cost price. They did not see themselves as ‘dealers’ in any way, but rather as ‘service providers’ or ‘enablers’ (Murphy et al., 2004). In one or two cases, participants would realise a small profit on these transactions that was enough to secure their own personal supplies, in what was a clear example of Coomber and Moyle’s (2014) notion of ‘minimally commercial supply’. Xavier (55, researcher, polydrug user), who had operated as a commercial dealer during his younger days, took an approach that was typical. He explained how ‘I have friends who grow skunk who I go to and buy it off when their cycle is ready every three months. I usually buy anything from one to four ounces. I distribute that amongst all my friends and associates who like nice strong cheap skunk. If I’m broke I might make myself, you know, a free quarter or something, otherwise it’s just a free service’. Thus



Xavier effectively operated as a non-profit seeking ‘go between’, and as a ‘stash dealer’ on those occasions when he secured his own supplies through the transactions (Murphy, Waldorf and Reinerman, 1990; Werse and Muller, 2016); nevertheless, his primary motivation was always to assist and facilitate his friends’ use, rather than to seek a profit or guarantee his own supply.

The drift into social supply activity was most marked amongst the cannabis home-growers in the sample. Three of the six home-growers engaged in some such activity. They sometimes distributed their product to friends as part of regular informal arrangements or, in the case of Vince (42, academic, cannabis user), as a gift on special occasions. Indeed Vince, who as we saw above greatly enjoyed the process of cultivation itself, suggested that ‘even if I stopped taking it myself, because again it’s something that’s quite a nice gift or something to give away, so even if I didn’t do it, I may still [grow] it and just give it to friends and that kind of thing, possibly’. Thus, these participants were very much operating along the lines of Murphy et al.’s (2004) ‘service providers’, facilitating the consumption of their friends and seeing this as a good in and of itself. The growing club in which Nathan (47, unemployed customs officer due to disability, cannabis user) partook also involved its members in supply activities. Nathan and his fellow club members might perhaps be likened to Murphy, Waldorf and Reinerman’s (1990) ‘connoisseurs’, as they sought to experiment with the production of high quality strains of cannabis with a greater variety than might be readily available in the local commercial market, although Murphy, Waldorf and Reinerman’s ‘connoisseurs’ were buyers rather than growers. None of the participants who grew their own cannabis did so in order to seek profit (Weisheit, 1991; Potter, 2010; Potter et al., 2015), even in those cases where a small one was realised.

As has been argued previously, 'supply can in some ways be conceived as a consequence of the buy, rather than the motivating intention' (Coomber, Moyle and South, 2016: 260). This was certainly the case for the social suppliers among our participants; their 'drift' into the supply (Murphy, Waldorf and Reinerman, 1990) of family and friends had emerged as a routine counterpart to their 'normal' (Hammersley, 2005 and 2011) use of illegal drugs. In all cases, they were effectively re-distributing their own supply of drugs to those closest to them as a straightforward favour. There was a rather benign, non-predatory social supply role that supported the notion of social supply as a 'normalised' part of 'recreational' illegal drug use (Coomber, Moyle and South, 2016).

## **Discussion**

Across the entire sample, it was abundantly clear that accessing drugs through the commercial market was considered a less attractive proposition than social supply. Indeed, as we have seen, nineteen of the participants had no engagement whatsoever with commercial dealers. Several closely related reasons were given for this. Firstly, participants felt that utilising commercial sources of illegal drugs would lead to a reduction of their own control over the drug sourcing experience (Decorte, 2010). More variables were left to chance when accessing drugs through commercial means. Secondly, participants considered that sourcing illegal drugs commercially was a riskier undertaking than social supply methods (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007; Potter, 2009). Participants were especially concerned about the potential for them to lose their carefully protected 'hidden' status should something go amiss with a commercial transaction. Thirdly, participants felt that they had a greater likelihood of being 'ripped off' in some way when engaging with commercial dealers. Fourthly, participants felt that commercial supply mechanisms offered a greater likelihood of poor quality or unsafe

drugs (Jacinto et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2004). This was of particular concern to those cannabis-using participants who considered that their use was for ‘medical’ reasons.

### ***Social supply as a measuring rod***

As the above hints, the concerns of our participants regarding the commercial supply of illegal drugs were rooted in a sense that it was deficient *as compared to* social supply. It was felt that the reduction in control, the increased risk, the prospect of being ripped off and the possibility of poor quality product could all be mitigated against by accessing drugs through social supply channels. Thus it seemed that social supply provided a model of what a satisfactory drug acquisition should look and feel like. As a result, even when drugs were accessed through commercial means, the notion of social supply acted as a measuring rod against which each act of sourcing drugs could be compared. The ideal-type of social supply therefore always shaped the participants’ responses to the illegal drug transactions they engaged in, even when they were unable to access socially supplied product in a given instance.

Winston (58, academic, cannabis user), for example, talked of an occasion when he had been unable to access drugs through social supply and had turned instead to a commercial operator: ‘It’s funny, when I first moved here, a friend, I’d only just got to know, he said “oh I can introduce you to the guy that gets me the stuff you know”, so I said [hesitantly] “well”, and he said “oh, he’s fine, he’s cool”.’ Note how Winston’s friend described the dealer in terms that might be applied to a social supplier (‘oh, he’s fine, he’s cool’), emphasising the sense of friendship and trust more readily associated with social supply. Winston continued, ‘we went round and it was very strange, [...] it’s the one time for a long time I’d gone round to someone I don’t know, you know, and I did it once and I thought well I’m not doing that again, I’d rather not have it. Partly because it was clearly a place where a lot of people did go

round to get this stuff, and if a student saw me, you know. [...] So, that's the only, a rare occasion when, possibly now it would be a friend that got it for me, possibly from that person, but I just thought that's too big a risk, it's not worth it, you know, it's not worth it.' Despite the fact that Winston's new friend had acted as a 'broker' of sorts in this transaction, his discomfort at engagement with a commercial dealer was obvious and he clearly felt the experience was deficient compared to the social supply transactions in which he usually partook.

Liam (45, unemployed, cannabis user) also recounted a bad experience with a commercial operator and suggested this as a reason for his reliance on socially supplied product: 'I've had bad experiences with drug dealers so it is better for me to be one step removed and get my friends to do it for me. [...] Back in the day when I've been dealing with dealers myself, and I've been "knocked" as the term goes for a couple of hundred pounds at a time and that's a bit disappointing [laughs]. That's, that's why I, I've got this thing where I'm one step removed from it because I can be kind of gullible.' For Liam, this risk of being 'ripped off' simply did not exist when he accessed drugs through social supply. Again, we can see how commercial transactions were considered flawed by our participants when measured against the standards of social supply.

This also helps to explain why our participants were so comfortable with the commercial transactions they engaged in with long-standing dealers. These transactions, despite being commercial in nature, *resembled* social supply in important respects. The dealers favoured by our participants had proven to be reliable and consistently provided product of an acceptable quality, often over many years. The values of friendship and trust (Taylor and Potter, 2013) were present even though the dealer was presumably motivated primarily by profit. Meanwhile, the transactions that measured up least favourably to social supply were those

that involved commercial dealers who were more nakedly profit-seeking. To return to Xavier's (55, researcher, polydrug user) example, these dealers would happily 'deliver to anyone, they don't give a shit who you are', and there was little prospect of building a friendly, enduring relationship.

### *Social supply as part of the drug using experience*

Social supply did not merely provide a yardstick for drug transactions. It was also symbolically and ritually important to our participants (Moyle, 2013). Many of them had been influenced by, for example, hippie and acid house subcultures in their younger days, and had held on to the idea of drug use as part of a potentially transcendent experience, engaged in for mutual enjoyment in communal settings or else during deeply personal moments of solitude and relaxation. One participant, Winston (58, academic, cannabis user), had been active in the 'Alternative Information Centre' movement during the 1970s and reminisced about the solidarity he had experienced. As he put it, 'I guess I increasingly sort of tried to attach my recreational substance use to a broader sense of the movement, political or social movement'. Even those who used for more straightforward reasons such as relaxation and enjoyment still viewed their drugs of choice with great fondness and often cherished the role drugs had played in their lives. Uri (47, care worker, cannabis user), who used cannabis simply as an aid to relaxation, talked of the comradeship he felt with fellow users, based largely upon their shared interest in an illegal activity that necessitated caution and discretion in order to avoid coming to the attention of the authorities. For him, this heightened the experience of using cannabis somewhat: 'There's sort of a comradeship among smokers as well, it exists and it kind of binds friendship bonds. I would say it goes with it, I guess partly because it's an illegal activity. So in a sense, you're looking after each other and [you] stay together and use coded words when you're talking about it in public. But having this kind of comradeship and

illegal activity, you feel a bit on the side of [pauses], er, conspiratorial, yeah, you feel conspiratorial.’<sup>6</sup>

In this context, social supply, with its inherent values of friendship, trust (Parker, 2000; Werse, 2008; Taylor and Potter, 2013) and sense of reciprocity (Coomber, Moyle and South, 2016) was more in keeping with the type of experience the participants were seeking. As far as they were concerned, any intrusion by the commercial market and the ruthless, predatory dealing practices engaged in by ‘money making scallies’ (Xavier, 55, researcher, polydrug user) would somehow sully the experience of using illegal drugs. Even where the truth of the commercial market was more benign, social supply resonated with the participants in a way that more nakedly businesslike transactions could not. On this basis, it is possible to tentatively suggest that socially supplied product seemed to enhance the ‘set’ (Zinberg, 1984) of the user and thus enriched the overall drug using experience.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that social supply, which is being increasingly recognised by researchers and, tentatively, by policy makers, found particular favour among our sample of hidden older users of illegal drugs. The overwhelming majority of our participants were able to access drugs through social supply mechanisms all or at least some of the time, and whenever they required drugs they turned to social supply in the first instance. When the participants were forced to venture into the ‘market proper’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2014) and engage with ‘real dealers’ (Jacinto et al., 2008; Stevenson, 2008; Potter, 2009), they measured these commercial transactions against the benchmarks provided by social supply. What the participants saw as the reduction in control, the increased risk, the likelihood of being ripped off and the likelihood of poor quality product meant that commercial transactions were often rated unfavourably against the ideal of social supply. Those commercial transactions that

most closely resembled social supply, involving longstanding dealers and a degree of trust and friendship, fared better. In addition, for our participants social supply tended to not merely be a means through which to source their product, but a symbolic and ritually important part of the whole process of using illegal drugs. Social supply resonated keenly with the general attitudes of our participants towards drug use, assisting them in the construction of a positive 'set' and serving to validate and enhance their drug using experience.

Of course, this was a study of extremely modest size and the results must be read in that context. Nevertheless, the tremendous importance of social supply for this particular group of individuals, both as a practical method of sourcing illegal drugs and as a mechanism through which meaning is attributed to the drug using experience, is patently clear. With other evidence suggesting that social supply is especially prevalent among older drug using adults (Hathaway, 1997: 118; Home Office 2014), our findings offer a foundation for the further research that is sure to follow as such individuals become greater in number and increasingly embedded in public consciousness in the coming years (Moxon and Waters, 2017: 157).

Such research would benefit from the construction of a larger sample to test some of the preliminary findings made here. Most obviously, it might seek to test whether the ubiquity of social supply found in this and previous studies (Coomber, Moyle and South, 2016) is evident in other settings. It could also investigate how far the type of drug sought after influences the mode of supply utilised; as we have seen, the two participants in this sample who had broad polydrug routines which included class 'A' drugs were forced into the commercial market to obtain these substances. Future work might also assess the state of social supply in territories where the commercial supply of, say, cannabis is permitted in some way; does this reduce reliance on social supply, or does it continue to thrive amongst this and other cohorts? A

larger sample could also facilitate investigation into how, for instance, the sex and ethnicity of hidden older users might impact upon how they obtain illegal drugs, something clearly not feasible with the number of participants here.

Finally, we would also suggest that our findings add weight to calls for an offence along the lines of Coomber and Moyle's (2014) 'minimally commercial supply' to be created. This would hopefully go some way to differentiating between varying modes of supply and acknowledging the lesser culpability of social suppliers as compared to, for instance, large scale commercial dealers. We can think of little good reason why the friends and family members who socially supplied our participants should run the risk of custodial sentences on the basis of their benign, non-predatory supply activities for the realisation of very little, if any, profit. Similarly, those of our participants who had themselves drifted into social supply activities themselves, 'sorting out' friends and relatives, often with home grown cannabis, should surely be insulated from the "heavy, deterrent, penal frameworks traditionally designed to capture profit motivated 'dealers proper'" (Moyle, Coomber and Lowther, 2013: 569). The law as it stands allows for the possibility of grossly disproportionate responses to social supply, and whilst the most serious outcomes for those social suppliers caught up in the criminal justice process may be considered unlikely, a hardening of attitudes among law enforcers or the courts (Coomber, 2010) could still potentially place them at great risk. Therefore the creation of an offence of 'minimally commercial supply', effectively differentiating social supply activities from commercial dealing, with more proportionate penalties, consistently applied (Moyle, Coomber and Lowther, 2013) would offer individuals such as our participants and their social suppliers some protection from the full force of the law and be more commensurate with the type of activity they are actually engaged in.

### **Disclosure of interest**



The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, following the Sentencing Council’s consultation on Sentencing for Drugs Offences, the Sentencing Advisory Panel (2009) decided against changes to the law for non-commercial supply but acknowledged that the absence of commercial motivation should be treated as a mitigating factor. Following this, the Sentencing Council (2012) produced new guidelines that went some way to acknowledging social supply as a lesser offence, although the term itself was not used. The guidelines included provision for judicial discretion in sentencing through the consideration of the ‘role’ of the offender and their ‘culpability’. In practice, this is read as the ‘harm’ that a transaction causes, and is measured by reference to the amount of drugs supplied. However, it has been argued that this approach can still lead to disproportionate outcomes as it relies on a strict interpretation of profit for gain and on unrealistic weight thresholds in determining the ‘harm’ caused (Coomber and Moyle, 2014; Coomber, Moyle and South, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See also the Police Foundation (2000) who, on the basis of an independent inquiry into the 1971 Act, found that many of those prosecuted for supply offences were not the commercial dealers who were target of the legislation. They recommended a separate offence of ‘dealing’ to be created at the top end of the scale. The Select Committee on Home Affairs (2002) disagreed and maintained that social supply should continue to be prosecuted as supply. However, they also recommended the creation of a ‘supply for gain’ offence at the top end of the scale. Incidentally, theirs was the first official use of the term ‘social supply’.

<sup>3</sup> Note that we refer to ‘normal’ drug use to denote a mode of use that does “not verge upon or develop into the pathological” (Hammersley 2005: 201) and is straightforwardly incorporated into otherwise unremarkable lifestyles. This is but a small part of wider processes of ‘normalisation’ (see especially Parker, Aldridge and Measham, 1998; Measham and Shiner, 2009; Aldridge, Measham and Williams, 2011; Pennay and Measham, 2016) and we make no claim about the extent of normalisation among older adults in general. That said, it seems fairly clear that normalisation is likely to be more advanced among younger cohorts in terms of the prevalence of illegal drug use, how it is perceived and how far it is tolerated. The prospect of intensifying normalisation among older adults in the coming years is an intriguing one, deserving of further study (Erickson and Hathaway, 2010: 138; Moxon and Waters, 2017: 145-52).

<sup>4</sup> Studies in both the UK and the US have consistently found that a greater proportion of current illegal drug users are male and that older males are more likely to use illegal drugs than older females, however ‘older’ is defined (for example Aitken et al., 2000; Plant, Plant and Mason, 2002; Anderson and Levy, 2003). The extent

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to which women's use might simply be more 'hidden' is uncertain. Indeed, several of our male participants had female partners who also used illegal drugs but they refused to be interviewed. Plant, Plant and Mason (2002) found that female users were more likely to report adverse consequences related to their use, although Glantz and Backenheimer (1988) found that illegal drug use among 'elderly' women was generally not problematic, especially in comparison to alcohol and prescription drug abuse. However they did suggest that this had the potential to change as younger cohorts, including more 'drug involved' women, grew older.

<sup>5</sup> The 'employment status' given in Table 1 is drawn from the participants' own descriptions of what they did for a living. As Notley (2005: 281) suggested when discussing her own study of hidden users, 'it was important to introduce as much variation as possible into the sample, and thus to "theoretically sample" a wide range of experiences that could be compared and contrasted during analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This need for variability during analysis had to be balanced against both achieving a sample of individuals who were sufficiently comparable to make it possible to develop a cohesive theory about a particular group, and the difficulties in obtaining that sample'.

<sup>6</sup> Winston and Uri's reminiscences call to mind the 'trading charities' (groups involved in the drug business due to ideological commitments, with profit a secondary motive) and 'mutual societies' (friendship networks of user-dealers who reciprocally exchange and sell drugs) ideal types developed in Dorn and South (1990) and Dorn, Murji and South (1992), although neither of these participants had ever been involved in the supply of illegal drugs themselves. The sense that over the years these rather 'amateur' supply channels had been progressively displaced by more overtly criminal and commercial 'firms', as described by Dorn, Murji and South (1992: xiv), was echoed by Winston.

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**Table 1: Details of the sample**

Alias	Age	Gender	Identifies as...	Employment status	Current user of...	Obtains drugs via...	Socially supplies others?
Lenny	53	M	white British	mechanic	cannabis	commercial market	no
Matthew	52	M	white British	self-employed civil engineer	cannabis, occasionally cocaine	social supply and commercial market	no
Ned	53	M	white British	unemployed	amphetamines	social supply	no
Ollie	52	M	white British	company owner	cannabis, occasionally cocaine	social supply	no
Pat	51	F	white British	unemployed	polydrug	commercial market	no
Quinn	51	F	white British	market trader	cannabis, occasionally cocaine	social supply	no
Roger	44	M	white British	manager in a small firm	cannabis	social supply	no
Simon	61	M	white British	researcher	cannabis	social supply	no
Tom	41	M	white British	horticulturalist	cannabis	home grow	yes
Uri	47	M	white British	care worker	cannabis	social supply and commercial market	no
Vince	42	M	white non-British or Irish	academic	cannabis	home grow	yes
Winston	58	M	white British	academic	cannabis	social supply	no
Xavier	55	M	white British	researcher	polydrug	social supply and commercial market	yes
Yannis	47	M	white British	regional manager	cannabis	social supply and commercial market	no
Zach	66	M	white British	retired fitter	cannabis	social supply	no
Adam	47	M	white British	unemployed [disability]	cannabis	social supply and home grow	no
Brian	52	M	white British	company owner	cannabis	commercial market	no
Colin	41	M	white British	internet entrepreneur	cannabis, occasionally other	commercial market	no
Derek	50	M	white British	gardener	cannabis, occasionally mushrooms	social supply	no
Eric	40	M	white British	consultant for relocation firm	cannabis	social supply and commercial market	no
Fran	41	F	white British	retired [disability]	cannabis	commercial market	no
Grace	48	F	white British	carer for child	cannabis	home grow	no
Harry	40	M	white British	NHS support worker	cannabis	social supply	no
Ian	46	M	white British	unemployed	cannabis	social supply	no
Jane	47	F	white non- British or Irish	delivery driver	cannabis, cocaine, occasionally ecstasy	social supply	no
Keith	63	M	white British	retired civil servant	cannabis	social supply	no
Liam	45	M	white Irish	unemployed	cannabis	social supply	no
Malcolm	44	M	white British	student	cannabis	social supply and commercial market	no
Nathan	47	M	white Irish	unemployed customs officer [disability]	cannabis	social supply and home grow	yes
Oscar	40	M	white British	volunteer	cannabis	home grow	no