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Explaining the Drug–Crime Link: Theoretical, Policy and Research Issues

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ABSTRACT

The belief that drug addiction is the motor behind much property crime has been a key part of recent UK drug policy. Review of the literature shows that the empirical evidence does not support this view. It also demonstrates that the fundamental weakness of existing research is its failure to address the question of causality properly, relying mainly on uni-directional mechanistic 'cause-and-effect' models. It is suggested that the drug–crime link needs to be conceived in the context of the interaction and inter-relation of a range of factors operating at different levels and as part of a set of complex processes. The implications for policy are that a reliance on improving access to treatment is likely to be of limited effectiveness in reducing drug-related crime and that an emphasis on tackling social exclusion may be more fruitful. Future research needs to explore further the notion of causality outlined in this paper. It must also examine emerging patterns of polydrug use and look at minority ethnic groups and women.

INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread belief that addiction to illegal drugs is the cause of a significant proportion of acquisitive crime. In recent years, this idea has exerted an increasingly strong hold on UK drug policy. The last Conservative government's drug strategy for England, *Tackling Drugs Together* (Lord President of the Council, 1995), identified the reduction of 'drug-related crime' as one of its three key objectives. The new Labour administration has gone further in its ten-year strategy, *Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain* (Lord President of the Council, 1998), by introducing the Drug Treatment and Testing Order. This is specifically targeted at offenders who commit acquisitive crime to fund an addiction and gives the court the power to sentence offenders to receive treatment for drug

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addiction and to undergo regular random drug testing. The strategy takes it as an indisputable and uncontroversial fact that a significant amount of property crime is committed by 'addicts' to buy drugs. In contrast with this broad consensus on the drug–crime link, social scientists are far less certain about the matter, as this paper will show. Given the strategy's declared aim of being based firmly on evidence this may be significant for its future development over the next ten years.

From a social policy perspective, an understanding of the relationship between drug use and crime is important since it affects both criminal justice and drug policy. Different conceptions of the link underlie aspects of debates about drug treatment, prevention, enforcement and legalisation as well as about sentencing policy and the development of strategies for local policing. However, the nature of the link in the UK in the 1990s is far from clear. The first aim of this paper is to synthesise current understanding by reviewing the literature, using the lens of social theory to identify some of the critical problems. Next, using this review as a starting point, some more general theoretical and methodological questions concerning the concept of causality will be considered. This discussion aims to provide a new sociological perspective on the drug–crime link. In the third section, some policy implications will be considered and directions for future research recommended.

It should be noted that this paper relates only to acquisitive crime committed by drug users.[1] Although there is considerable concern in the UK about links between drugs and violent crime, particularly in and around urban drug markets, this is beyond my scope here. Also, in reviewing the literature, the focus is on relatively recent UK research rather than on the extensive international literature which will be referred to only where it is especially relevant. This is because it is a basic tenet of the sociological approach developed in this paper that social phenomena can only be fully understood by situating them in their specific social, economic and cultural contexts. Thus, empirical evidence cannot simply be applied across historical periods or from one country to another without extreme caution.

THREE EXPLANATIONS OF THE DRUG–CRIME LINK

There is a clear consensus in the literature that there is a strong correlation between non-recreational drug use[2] and crime. However, the question of causality provokes disagreement. Essentially, three different models of the relationship have been proposed: drug use leads to crime; crime leads to drug use; both crime and drug use are related to other factors.

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Drug use causes crime

The first model, sometimes called the 'economic necessity' explanation, holds that the pharmacological properties of illegal drugs create an uncontrollable need in users which, in the absence of any significant legitimate income, compels them to commit crime to finance their habit. Causality is conceived by proponents of this model as an essentially mechanical process whereby one set of circumstances inevitably leads to (or causes) another. Its strongest recent empirical support has come from the work of Parker and colleagues (Parker and Newcombe, 1987; Parker *et al.*, 1988; Parker and Bottomley, 1996). This work focuses primarily on heroin use but the more recent study also looks at crack-cocaine use.

In brief, Parker and colleagues found two different groups of user-offenders: those with a prior criminal record whose offending accelerated after becoming involved in drugs and those without a record before their drug use who subsequently became heavily involved in property crime. However, as Hammersley *et al.* (1989, p. 1032) note, it is not clear that these two groups are actually different since the measure used for prior criminality is convictions, which are known to represent only a small proportion of actual offences committed.[3] Thus, it might be that the vast majority of user-offenders were in fact involved in property crime before their first use of heroin or crack-cocaine (and indeed other research, e.g Burr, 1987; Edmunds *et al.*, 1998, has found this to be the case). The finding that their criminal activity rapidly increased when they became drug dependent also can be explained other than by the drugs-cause-crime model. As other studies have found, levels of drug use are often to a large extent determined week-to-week by success in crime (and the resulting money available) rather than physical need (Parker, 1996; Grapendaal, 1992). In other words, periods of criminal success are accompanied by a more extravagant lifestyle in which increased drug consumption is one part (and vice versa when less money has been generated). In further support of this, Hammersley *et al.* (1989, p. 1040) found in their detailed study that 'day-to-day, crime was a better explanation of drug use than drug use was of crime'.

An implication of the 'drugs-cause-crime' model, if correct, would be that a free supply of drugs to 'addicts' or successful treatment should remove the need to commit crime. However, several studies show that although prescribing heroin or methadone can reduce criminal activity, it does not stop it altogether (Bennett and Wright, 1986; Jarvis and Parker, 1990; Parker and Kirby, 1996). Some studies have even indicated that in certain circumstances treatment can have no effect on crime at all. For example, Burr (1987, p. 341) found that in her sample neither

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methadone maintenance nor giving up heroin (temporarily or permanently) led to people necessarily stopping thieving. An earlier study by Weipert *et al.* (1979) also found that maintenance had no clear impact on criminal activity. Recent emerging research on treatment of various types is again finding reductions in crime rather than cessations (Gossop, 1998). A major analytical difficulty with studies of the effectiveness of different treatment modalities is that the samples tend to consist of well-motivated people who have reached a stage in their drug-using career where they want to 'slow down' (Jarvis and Parker, 1990). Thus, it is difficult to apportion any subsequent crime reduction effect solely to the treatment or prescribing itself rather than to the motivation of the sample. Even if this problem is ignored, the fact that crime merely reduces rather than stops altogether suggests that the model provides at best only a partial explanation of the relationship. Grapendaal *et al.* (1995) argue, on the basis of their study of heroin addicts in Amsterdam, that methadone prescribing systems form only one part of the context of drug-related crime and therefore can only have a limited effect in reducing it.

On the other hand, if this model is incorrect, the question is raised of how users, who tend to have a low legitimate income, manage to finance their relatively expensive habits. The UK and international literature on income sources for heroin users shows that they rely on a number of ways of raising money (e.g. wages, benefits, drug dealing, sex work, partners' income, gifts from family/friends) of which property crime is just one (Hammersley *et al.*, 1989; Parker and Bottomley, 1996; Bennett, 1998; Dorn *et al.*, 1994). Thus, although an individual user may be spending large amounts each week on drugs, he or she will typically finance only a minority of this expenditure by acquisitive crime.

As has been shown, the 'drugs-cause-crime' model is not wholly supported by empirical research. By considering its assumptions about causality, it is possible to understand more clearly why it is flawed at a theoretical level. The model is derived from a static deterministic conception of human action: a particular combination of factors (drug addiction plus low legitimate income) is held to lead inevitably to a certain outcome (acquisitive crime to fund addiction). This type of causal model fails to address the complexities of how 'objective conditions are interpreted through the specific subcultures of groups' (Young, 1992, p. 34). In other words, it is far too deterministic and mechanistic. It is also based on a 'retreatist' model of drug use drawn from the sociology of Merton (1957). In the context of the drug–crime debate the appropriateness of this model can be refuted empirically. The pioneering work of Preble and Casey (1969) showed that the lifestyle of the New York street addict, far from

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being passive and retreatist, was in fact better described as active and resourceful. British research in the 1980s has also confirmed this picture (Auld *et al.*, 1984, 1986).

Crime causes drug use

Numerous studies have found that for many drug users criminality predates drug-taking (Mott and Taylor, 1974; Home Office, 1985; Bean and Wilkinson, 1988; Auld *et al.*, 1986; Burr, 1987; Parker and Newcombe, 1987; Parker and Bottomley, 1996; Matthews and Trickey, 1996). This has led some researchers to suggest that it is involvement in crime which leads to drug use rather than the other way round.

Auld *et al.* (1986), writing in the mid-1980s, argue that mass unemployment and low state benefits leave young people barely able to satisfy basic needs. In order to secure a standard of living better than mere survival, they become involved in the petty-criminal 'irregular' economy. It is then through this involvement that they come into contact with heroin – buying, selling, exchanging and consuming it. Thus, it is crime which leads to heroin use.

Burr (1987) argues that in the South London area she studied, it was the strong pre-existing local criminal culture which made young people especially vulnerable to heroin use as they were able to finance large habits over the long term. The existence of established networks for 'fencing' stolen goods (which could also be used to sell or exchange heroin) led to the rapid spread of heroin use and related crime. The deviant value system made thieving acceptable behaviour. She concludes that 'use of heroin was an extension rather than a cause of their delinquent behaviour' (1987, p. 350).

These two studies provide a corrective to the conventional view of drug addiction causing crime. Auld *et al.* focus particularly on the need to understand the socio-economic context whilst Burr looks more at socio-cultural and subcultural aspects. Their strengths lie in this contextualising approach which eschews medical or monocausal explanations. However, they are also flawed in two main ways. First, there is evidence that some user-offenders are not involved in crime prior to drug use (Parker and Newcombe, 1987; Bean and Wilkinson, 1988) which is not accounted for by their arguments, although since most studies rely on conviction records which only pick up a fraction of actual offences it is difficult to assess the size of this group (see Hammersley *et al.*, 1989, p. 1032). Second, not all people who get involved in criminal or irregular local economies end up taking heroin and committing property crimes, yet the processes through which some do and some do not are not clear.

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Both these points are linked to the way causality is conceptualised. For all the sophistication of their analyses, there remains something mechanistic about the patterns and sequences described by both studies. Thus, again, a better understanding of the concept of causality seems to be required.

Crime and drug use are related to other factors

The third model of the relationship is the least well developed in the literature and has yet to be refined into a single coherent position. In essence, this model rejects deterministic explanations of the drug–crime link and instead holds that the two are related either to a single third variable or to a complex set of factors.

Edmunds *et al.* (1998) in research on arrest referral schemes found that 92 per cent of their sample had been first arrested long before their drug use was problematic. They also found that when drug use became heavier so their acquisitive criminal activity intensified. On the basis of this, their hypothesis is:

> it makes sense to conceptualise the causal links as dynamic or interactive. Criminal and drug-using careers often develop in parallel; stated simply, acquisitive crime provides people with enough cash to develop a drug habit, and the drug habit locks them into acquisitive crime. (1998, p. 10)

This is an interesting attempt to square the circle of the long debate between the 'drugs-cause-crime' and 'crime-causes-drugs' schools but there are other hypotheses which could also explain these empirical findings. For example, the fact that heavy periods of drug use coincide with heavy involvement in crime could be because success in the latter provides the funds to finance the former. The parallel development of drug and crime careers might indicate that both are particular expressions or symptoms of broader delinquent behaviour which is caused by other factors (e.g. family circumstances, employment status and so on). Clearly, unpicking the causal links requires a more searching and focused enquiry if it is to move beyond generating new but unproven hypotheses.

An interesting study by Klee and Morris (1994) compared the criminal behaviour of heroin and amphetamine injectors. It was found that they had similar rates of offending but the amphetamine users' weekly expenditure on drugs was much lower. In other words, their motivation for committing crime appeared to be mainly non-economic. The authors speculate that stimulant users who seek and enjoy the sensations of being alert, active and confident may be attracted to the similar adrenaline thrills of shoplifting and burglary. They argue that research has failed to

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take account of the effects of different drugs and their associated lifestyles on criminal behaviour.

The work of Hammersley and colleagues in Glasgow (Hammersley and Morrison, 1987; Hammersley *et al.*, 1989, 1990) is perhaps the most sophisticated version of this third model. It is also noteworthy for the fact that it does not focus solely on heroin but also looks at users of other drugs, including cannabis and alcohol. In brief, their research rejects deterministic models and suggests that there is a complex interactive relationship between drug use and crime which is influenced by a range of 'psychosocial and cultural mechanisms' (1989, p. 1041). They argue that both behaviours are better viewed as symptoms of delinquency which has its roots in users' social and personal background. They also note that different patterns and combinations of polydrug use affect the nature of the relationship, which ties in with the study by Klee and Morris (1994) discussed above.

This third model, although relatively undeveloped as yet, shows the most promise as an explanatory tool and seems to make the best 'fit' with the empirical evidence. Its theoretical and conceptual basis, however, has not been clearly or satisfactorily worked out. A possible way forward in this regard is, however, suggested by the work of Hammersley and colleagues. Essentially, drug use and offending are seen as influenced by the broader socioeconomic context, by the subcultures and lifestyles in which people become involved and by individual factors such as preferences for particular drugs and the psychological effects of their long-term use. In other words, they employ a social scientific approach which attempts to link macro and micro explanations of the drug–crime link. The aim of the next section of this paper is to develop this type of thinking into a more coherent framework for enquiry. In doing so, it will focus on the question of causality which, it has been argued, is central to an understanding of this issue.

THE QUESTION OF CAUSALITY

The analysis in the previous section suggested that the inadequacies of existing research are the result of a failure to address properly the question of causality. The purpose of this section is to examine this concept more closely in order to form the basis of a new perspective on the drug–crime association.

Looking at the idea of causality, it is clear that it is necessary not only to set out more precisely what the concept means in this context but also how it might be demonstrated empirically. In other words, there is both a theoretical and a methodological dimension to the question. In terms of

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the theoretical aspect, the review in the first part of this paper showed that deterministic unidirectional cause–effect models are conceptually inadequate for examining the drug–crime relationship. By contrast, a model which sees the association as part of a complex process in which a large number of factors operating at different levels are implicated has far more explanatory power. The literature indicates a number of factors which may be involved in this process, including type of drug used, individual psychological make-up, local economies, local cultures and subcultures and the broader socioeconomic context. As to how they are linked, the review suggests, first, that they are inter-related in an interactive rather than unidirectional way. Second, relationships between factors are better described in terms of tendencies or probabilities rather than as determined or inevitable.

This outline conceptualisation of 'causality' has much in common with 'realist' or 'scientific realist' approaches to social science (Sayer, 1992; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Sayer (1992) constructs an explanation of causation using notions of causal powers and liabilities, necessity, contingency and overdetermination. Although his arguments are too detailed to be presented here, they clearly resonate with the ideas sketched out above of complex processes, multiple causal factors and the importance of context. Similarly, Pawson and Tilley (1997) stress the need to understand causal mechanisms and the way they operate in different contextual conditions. A closer engagement with realism by researchers in this area would provide the theoretical underpinning which will help advance understanding of the drug–crime link.

It is worth noting that the conception of causality suggested here is also influenced by longstanding insights from mainstream sociology. For example, Weber not only stressed the multicausal nature of social phenomena but, also, in his notion of 'adequate causality', stated that social science could only establish probabilistic relationships rather than automatic deterministic ones. Similarly, Marx's dialectical mode of analysis showed that social relations need to be conceived in terms of complex interactive relationships rather than with unidirectional cause–effect models. Thus, in this sense, it can be argued that a serious consideration of causality requires a sociological approach.

It should be noted too, for the sake of conceptual clarity, that the notion of causality proposed here relies on an implicit conception of 'the subject' which lies somewhere between the classical idea of the free-willed individual and the determinism of positivist criminology. This conception, known as 'soft determinism', holds that individuals' freedom of choice as to how to act is restricted by their particular social, economic and cultural circumstances.

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Turning to the methodological dimension of the question of causality, this has several aspects. In general terms, qualitative research methods provide the best tools for the analysis of the type of complex causal process outlined above (Sayer, 1992). Although quantitative research might be able to identify correlations and calculate probabilities, it could not explain how and why the process works. Thus, in specific terms, in order to tease out these detailed workings, a series of ethnographies of the drug–crime association is required. These would need to look not only at drug-using offenders but also at non-drug-taking groups with similar sociodemographic characteristics in order to illuminate the processes by which people become involved in different patterns of delinquency and by which some remain non-delinquent. It follows too from the notion of 'soft determinism' that such studies would need to set these processes in their wider social, economic and cultural contexts.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The literature review in the first section of this paper has some significant policy implications. First, the notion of drug treatment or prescribing as a significant means of crime reduction is flawed. It is based on the belief that drug addiction is the motor behind much property crime which is not supported by the empirical research. The new Drug Treatment and Testing Order introduced in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 is therefore likely to have a limited effect on levels of property crime, contrary to government expectations. Further, as Parker and Kirby (1996) note, the increasing growth of polydrug use may pose demanding new challenges on current treatment responses, particularly those based on use of opiate substitutes such as methadone. Drug treatment as a panacea for property crime is a strategy unlikely to succeed.

Second, and related to the above point, the new drugs strategy (Lord President of the Council, 1998) continues to support schemes which divert drug-using offenders into drug services as a key way of tackling drug-related crime. Yet some research has suggested that referral schemes operating from different points in the criminal justice system are of limited effectiveness (Dorn, 1994; Dorn and Seddon, 1996). In contrast, the most recent evaluation of arrest referral schemes for the Home Office (Edmunds *et al.*, 1998) is much more positive about what such initiatives can achieve. This may partly reflect developments in approaches used in the last couple of years but the authors also acknowledge limitations in their methodology and sampling which mean their conclusions can only be provisional and tentative (Edmunds *et al.*, 1998, pp. vi, 19–20,

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32–4). There is a need for firmer and more rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of referral schemes.

Another policy which is often called for as a solution to the 'drug–crime' problem is the legalisation of 'hard' drugs. The literature indicates that faith in this idea as an answer is also misplaced. There are two different strands of argument here. The first is based on the belief that 'drug-related crime' is caused by addicts feeding an insatiable need for expensive illicit drugs. The argument is that if these drugs were made available legally at much lower cost, the need to commit crime would be removed. However, as has been shown, this model of the drug–crime link is not supported by the research. The second strand is founded on the notion that it is involvement in the 'irregular' economy and criminal networks that brings many people into contact with drugs. It is argued that if drugs were removed from the illicit economy, fewer people would use them. Again, this is not wholly supported by the empirical evidence. In relation to arguments about legalisation, it is worth noting that there is a large body of literature on the association between the use of alcohol and crime (South, 1997, pp. 948–50; Russell, 1993). Indeed, recent research has shown that alcohol is a common element in polydrug use amongst young offenders (Parker, 1996).

More broadly, the analysis of the literature suggests a need to rethink the whole concept of 'drug-related crime' which features in most of the policy documents and research in this area. It is typically used to mean acquisitive crime causally related (in a deterministic way) to drug use but, as has been shown, this conception does not fit in with research findings. An alternative meaning could simply be crime committed by drug users but this rather begs the question. The literature indicates that the association is best viewed as simply one particular pattern of delinquency. In other words, 'drug-related crime' is no more than a label descriptive of a certain set of behaviours which has little independent heuristic value. It follows from this that the continuing attempts to quantify the cost of drug-related or heroin-related crime (Dorn *et al.*, 1994) are of limited help in policy-making. This is especially so when they fail to incorporate the findings of economic analyses (Johnson *et al.*, 1985) which, as Pearson (1990, p. 147) notes, reveal that 'in purely economic terms more people stand to gain from heroin-user crime than suffer from it' (because of the way the market in stolen goods enlarges the purchasing power of poor families within 'ghetto economies').

What then might a more effective policy look like? The literature indicates that the policy needs to address the broader category of delinquency of which 'drug-related crime' is just one part. In doing so, it needs to

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position delinquency within wider social processes and engage properly with the deeper aetiological questions which are currently ignored. First, it follows from the conception of causality discussed above that a range of social agencies and institutions, not just those within the criminal justice system, need to be involved in any serious response to the problem. Further, interventions need to have as their object not only the individual but also the underlying structure of social and economic relations. In brief outline, it would require an integrated and holistic approach based on a partnership between local and national government and the voluntary sector. The aims would include regenerating local economies, reducing youth unemployment, providing and maintaining decent housing, improving education services and developing adequate community and leisure facilities (Young, 1991). Resources at the local level would need to be targeted at those most likely to become 'delinquent', primarily young males in deprived urban areas (Pearson *et al.*, 1986; Pearson, 1987; but cf. South, 1997, pp. 934–5). Alongside these measures a co-ordinated response to user-offenders by welfare and criminal justice agencies is essential (Jarvis and Parker, 1989, pp. 184–5) but without addressing the wider context this type of strategy will have a very limited effect.

In terms of future research, the primary need is for longitudinal contextualised ethnographic work that explores further the conception of causality outlined in the previous section. This detailed research then needs to be reconnected with large-scale quantitative survey data in order to provide a complete picture. More specifically, there are two areas which have been especially neglected by researchers and should be priorities for future studies. First, as with drug research in general, most studies have been of white males and there is an urgent need to look at other ethnic groups and women. Second, research must move away from concentrating solely on heroin and start to examine crack-cocaine and different patterns of polydrug use.

Looking to the future, what are the prospects of success for the government's new strategy in terms of tackling 'drug-related crime'? The flagship Drug Treatment and Testing Order seems likely to have a limited impact, for reasons already discussed. More positively, if the arguments in this paper are correct, then the recognition in the strategy of the links between social exclusion and drug problems may be the start of a more promising policy.

NOTES

1. Acquisitive crime is defined in this paper to include theft, burglary, robbery, shoplifting, fraud and deception. Involvement in sex work (primarily by women) to fund a drug habit is not cov-

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ered here for two reasons. First, there is a dearth of research on this issue, mirroring criminology's broader neglect of the criminality of women. Second, it raises a series of issues about gender relations which merit a separate analysis.

2. It is important to note that the perceived problem of 'drug-related crime' relates only to the small minority whose drug use is problematic, recently estimated as around 3 per cent of all drug users (Edmunds *et al*., 1998, p. iii). For the remaining 97 per cent who use recreationally or non-problematically there is no evidence of causal connections between drug use and property crime.
3. Another study by Parker (Jarvis and Parker, 1989) supplements conviction records with self-report data but it still only demonstrates a strong association between drugs and crime rather than a causal link.

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