

A Critical Examination of Gender Differences in Drug Selling for the Non-Violent Street Level Drug Seller

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This study examines the impact of the “American Dream” as a motivator for individual offending, as well as gender differences in drug selling for non-violent street level drug sellers. Semi-structured interviews with current Cook County, Illinois probationers, n=20 African American females and n=20 African American males, were conducted to explore gender differences in motivations for drug selling. Findings lend support to the hypothesis that the motivations for drug selling differ by gender. Female participants reported their motivations for selling drugs were primarily to meet the needs of dependent others, while males used drug selling to obtain proximate status indicators.

Keywords: Anomie Theory, Gender Differences, Drug Selling, American Dream

Under the ongoing threat of a revamping of the war on drugs, it is pertinent to examine the impact of the drug economy and drug arrests. Drug crimes account for a significant number of arrests, convictions, and incarcerations (approximately one-third) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008), but not enough attention has been given to understanding what compels poor, inner city Black women and men to utilize, specifically, *this* type of criminal coping and the gender differences that may lie therein. The effects of the heavy law enforcement targeting of the drug economy, whether unintentional or intentionally aimed at specific populations, has resulted in the mass incarceration of a significant portion of young Black men and huge growth on the number of imprisoned Black women.

While rates of use and selling among Whites still far exceed the involvement of Blacks in the drug economy, it is the differential enforcement in police and subsequent court action that accounts for the disproportionate numbers of Black people arrested, charged, convicted and incarcerated for drug crimes (Alexander, 2012, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

According to The National Institute on Drug Abuse, while only 15% of the 13 million habitual users in the United States were Black and 77% were white, Black people were four times more likely to be arrested on drug charges than whites in the nation as a whole, and seven to nine times more likely in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey (2003). Add to that, the hard targeting of street level dealers by police, who are most often operating in the public sphere as opposed to mid-level drug deals and drug “kingpins,” who tend to be relatively insulated by several layers of underlings in the drug hierarchy.

By midyear 2008, Black men accounted for almost 40% of state and federal prison inmates, while Black persons in general (male and female) comprised approximately only 12.8% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). While female incarceration rates are substantially lower than males, Black women make up a little over one-third of all females in jail, state, or federal custody and their numbers are continually growing (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). The combination of harsh drug laws, changing patterns of drug use, and mandatory sentencing policies have lead to a significant increase in women’s incarceration rates over the last 20 years (Richie, 2001).

Turning to non-custodial correctional supervision, drug offenses account for 27% and 37%, respectively, of those on probation and parole, eclipsing any other crime category including property and violent crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). While this trend is both shocking and distressing, it makes pertinent the need to go beyond ostensible legal explanations and learn the social conditions that may contribute to this gross disproportionality. This paper contributes to the conversation about the impact of social structure on the American Dream and criminal coping by examining gender differences in motivations for selling drugs at the street level.

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1. Literature Review

The complex layers of criminal motivation relating to anomie theory can be traced to the early works of the late 19th century sociologist, Emile Durkheim. In his seminal work, *Suicide*, Durkheim (1897) refers to the requisite proportionality between needs and the means to meet them. In relation to social material desires in the 21st century, we've seen a paradigm shift in the way need is conceptualized.

Merton (1938), expounding on Durkheim's work and perhaps witnessing and foreseeing the shift in America's cultural landscape, created a conceptual framework for future strain and anomie theorists to organize this paradigm shift. Merton's postulation that individuals are asked to orient their conduct toward achieving mainstream goals, such as money, status, and power, while they are largely denied legitimate opportunities to do so institutionally, encompass large populations of traditionally and contemporarily disenfranchised communities. American success symbols have been clearly defined and transcend class lines. That is, the stratification that exists between the "haves" and the "have nots" have a commonality in what is valued in our culture: wealth, status, and power. Merton develops a powerful dialectic when he concludes that frustration and thwarted aspirations may eventuate in illicit attempts to acquire the dominant values (Merton, 1938). The exploration of how the drug sellers under study identify their thwarted aspirations and how that may impact their decision to sell drugs may correlate in ways previously unknown to anomie scholars. Although Merton has made a significant contribution to anomie, the theory has been considerably expanded and improved by later anomie/strain theorists. As competing theories of crime (describing male criminal behavior), began to emerge and gain increased recognition, anomie theory experienced a decline in popularity. The field of criminology would later see a resurgence of anomie theory credited in large part to the works of Messner & Rosenfeld (1994). Together, they proposed a theory of anomie that focused on the imbalance between the cultural system and opportunity structures that are in place for the pursuit of the "American Dream."

Modernized, the American Dream can be described as a cultural commitment to the goal of economic success, to be pursued by everyone under conditions of open, individual competition (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2007).

Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) contend that the criminogenic tendencies of the American Dream derive from its *exaggerated* emphasis on monetary success and its resistance to limits on the means for the pursuit of success. The American Dream promotes and sustains a social institutional structure in which one institution, the economy, assumes dominance over all others. The resulting imbalance in the institutional structure diminishes the capacity of other institutions, such as the family, education, and the political system, to curb crime fostering cultural pressures and to impose controls over and provide support for the members of society (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2007)."

1.1 Theoretical Framework

There are few belief systems as pervasive and universal as the American Dream. It in some way seeps into all facets of American society, be it by class, political ideology, race, gender, religion, and even criminal preference. This holds true even for those that have the least probability of achievement of those goals; low income, undereducated, urban Black women and men. It is this population that continues to face the most barriers to economic success.

The racist roots of the American dream, even before recognized, started with the forced importation of Black Africans to the Americas for the purpose of building a country in which the hopes and dreams of whites were achieved by any means necessary. With the system of slavery came the first generations of American wealth and prosperity. As capitalism evolved, so too did American dream ideology and the emphasis on money and material status indicators.

In their seminal work, "Crime and the American Dream," Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) advance the idea of "commodity worship," (a major theme to be explored in this study) inherent in American culture, stating: "...the emphasis on material success by any means necessary-have inflamed the consumption desires of inner-city children and adolescents, creating 'commodity worship' that even the strongest institutions would have difficulty keeping under control."The heightened awareness of this "competition" is a logical consequence of the American Dream at the micro level.

1.2 How has this competition affected poor Black men?

For men, “commodity worship” in the context of relative poverty² increases risk for street level drug sales. Culturally driven strains and stressors seem to make men more likely to have entered the drug trade for materialistic purposes, centered on achievement and posturing for peers. Pressure to provide familial support will be a peripheral factor in terms of motivation. Their *basic* needs may be met, but proximate social norms relative to their environment compel them toward commodity worship. However, their ideals of social status and material goods are not necessarily driven by traditional or mainstream notions of material success.

Of greater importance is the symbolism of what this population sees as “successful.” Low income communities are bombarded with media images competing for their monetary attention but perhaps the greatest influence is what they view in their everyday environment: neighborhood role models that are beneficiaries from the drug economy juxtaposed with images of urban blight, high unemployment, struggle, and violence. However, this interpretation should not be understood as rudimentary or derogatory but instead as an elucidation of the everyday space they inhabit. It is natural for one to project notions of success on the different levels of categorizations developed for one’s neighborhood. Just as being “middle class” is equated with opportunity, home ownership, and higher education, this lens is formed through interaction with the neighborhood and environment.

Commodity worship will be used to explain male involvement in the drug trade, in direct contrast to women’s involvement. Poverty for participants in this study is crucial to understanding their motivations for their drug selling activity. When defining relative poverty, people are in poverty when they fall below, by more than a certain distance, from the average income and lifestyle enjoyed by the rest of the society in which one lives (Lindsey, 2008). Relative poverty recognizes the material and status desires of the lower class. It is this definition of relative poverty that will be a prime motivating factor in participants, specifically men’s, decision to sell drugs. While this group may not necessarily be living a “hand-to-mouth” existence, there is certainly the self *perception* that they have, to some degree, fallen behind the type of lifestyle enjoyed by the rest of society (proximate to their social environment).

1.3 How has this competition affected poor Black women?

It begins by removing the application of relative poverty from the equation and replacing it with absolute poverty. Absolute poverty is the measure of the number of people living below a certain income threshold or the number of households unable to afford certain basic goods and services (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Women will be attracted to drug selling primarily due to absolute poverty and the associated family strains and burdens (i.e. being single parents, caring for dependent others). Using an anomie framework to show gender differences in drug selling will show differential impact and consumption of the American dream. However, this approach is not without its detractors.

There have been a number of studies done on juveniles to assess the extent of differences if any, between boys and girls in their delinquent offending, using a strain theory model. Generally, those studies have concluded that there is little difference between male and female delinquency (Mazerolle, 1998; Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, and Piquero, 1998; Cauffman, et. al., 2004). Approaches that embrace gendered pathways into crime as put forth by feminist scholars and gender specific application of GST, serve to counter this trend of little or no gender differences in delinquency (Piquero and Sealock, 2004; Hay, 2003; Deschenes and Esbensen, 1999; Broidy and Agnew, 1997). Belknap and Holsinger (2006) surveyed 444 incarcerated juveniles to better understand the risk associated specifically with girl’s delinquency, concluding that although GST and life course theory are valuable in explaining girl’s delinquency, feminist pathways may offer better understanding of girl’s offending and treatment and intervention strategies.

While this study is an attempt to discern gender differences in drug selling in the social structure tradition, it is different in several ways. First, this is not theory testing research. While this study is conducted using anomie theory as a potential lens with which to view this particular crime, it does not seek to test the theory using a focused sample. Second, as an exploratory study, this research is used to explore this phenomenon in an effort to see if it can be organized and explained in the anomie tradition.

² Describes the level of poverty that falls below the *average* income and lifestyle enjoyed by the rest of the society in which one lives.

This approach is appropriate because little, if any, previous research has attempted a gendered exploration in drug selling. The research questions developed are intended to explore different aspects of the problem of drug selling and how it fits within American dream framework. Lastly, this study employs a sample of adults, who arguably are substantially more constrained than juveniles and who are also expected to shoulder the burden of not only their responsibilities, but others around them. Juveniles tend to have very little worldly responsibilities which may account for studies that have traditionally and routinely found little difference between boy's and girl's delinquency. One stark exception to this may be youth growing up in disadvantaged communities, who may be expected to share in responsibilities otherwise handled by parents or guardians. Typically, as people grow older they are constrained in almost every sector of their life, work, home, social, etc. This study has the intention to help formulate questions surrounding the difference between men and women's involvement in the drug economy as a result of the pressure of American dream standards.

2. Methods

Although there have been a burst of compelling ethnographies in the last 15 years chronicling the effect of marginalization of Black men in American society, none explicitly look at drug sales through a gendered and classed lens. Those that do are equally compelling reads but are not authored by scholars. The voluminous literature available fails to look at the consequences of the effect of social isolation and concentrated poverty and its role as a motivator in the decision to sell drugs. Hence, the objective of this project was to increase our understanding of the individual lived experiences of Black women and men surrounding their decision to get involved in drug selling and, on a micro level, explore the impact that the American Dream may have had on this decision. Adult Black women and men's experiences were gathered using semi structured interviews. Out of the probation locations where I interviewed, I was allowed to bring a tape recorder into only one location. Thus, some of the interviews were recorded and others were handwritten. Data was immediately transcribed after each day of interviews. Once transcribed, responses were coded and analyzed for themes that underscored gender differences as well as structural impact on criminal coping. In order for a theme to be recognized, concordance had to be shown in 70% of the women or men for a gendered categorization. When recognizing patterns for women and men combined, a concordance rate of 80% was sought. Interviewees were paid \$25 for their participation.

2.1 Sample Overview

The sample consisted of Black women (n=20) and Black men (n=20) currently on probation in Cook County that have been convicted of delivery/manufacture of a controlled substance. This specific charge was chosen because those arrested for this offense was in possession of an amount that would "qualify" them as a seller, whereas, a possession charge and its related offenses typically signify personal use. Participants were gathered through the use of a convenience sample, a form of nonprobability sampling in which participants are chosen because they are readily available (Doane and Seward, 2008).

Data was collected using intensive semi structured interviews. The advantage of this method is that it allows participants to express experiences that are not easily categorized, predetermined or quantifiable (Ferraro and Moe, 2003), while giving the researcher a comprehensive picture of participants background, attitudes, and actions, in their own terms (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Although the use of preset interview questions was employed, participants were encouraged to deviate when they felt it was appropriate to do so. Said flexibility allowed for a rich, descriptive, and detailed narrative.

2.2 Demographics

This study sought out "typical" representation of the low level street dealer, by default, making it a racialized study. A characteristic profile of participants in this study was: African American, low income, undereducated, under or unemployed, and disproportionately from high crime urban areas. These characteristics are representative of those most often arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for this crime category. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2006, 57% of all state felony defendants in Cook County, IL were charged with drug offenses. Overwhelmingly, men accounted for the largest percent of defendants, 83%, while women made up 17% of those charged with drug offenses. Black non-Hispanics accounted for 67% of all state felony defendants in Cook County, regardless of type of felony. Probation was the most heavily utilized type of sanction at 46% for state felony offenders with incarceration as a close second at 45% (Cohen and Kycckelhahn, 2010).

The three areas that guided this research were:

1. Motivations for entrance to the drug trade
2. Gender differences in motivations for selling
3. The impact of the American Dream on criminal coping

3. Results

The sheer number of Black men and women using drug selling as a vehicle to supplement or replace their income speaks volumes to the real or perceived opportunities for legitimate income opportunities available to them. Fundamental principles associated with the American Dream: a car, house, education for the children, a secure retirement- has long been associated with opportunities for the middle class (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2007). However, this study illustrates that Black people from lower socioeconomic classes may share some of the same goals (if not all) and seeks to answer the central research question: how do Black men and women differ in their motivations for drug selling and do they have the same interpretation of the American Dream?

3.1 Summary of the Male Sample

The male participants were all African Americans currently on probation in Cook County stemming from a conviction of delivery and manufacture of a controlled substance. Of the 20 participants, 13 (65%) were from the south side of Chicago and of that 13, eight were from the Englewood neighborhood. The Englewood section of Chicago consistently has one of the highest crime rates in the Chicagoland area and at times one of the highest crime rates in the nation. Although it is just 3.07 square miles, this community had 1,091 incidents of violent crime from July 2010- July 2011 and 63 homicides of Black men in their teens to early 20's from January 2008 to June 2011 (Chicagopolice.org). Like other areas in Chicago, Englewood has suffered from "Black Flight" where middle class Black residents left the community for the suburbs. (U.S. Census, 2010). Other south side neighborhoods home to the men were Back of the Yards, Bronzeville, and Hyde Park. Another five participants were from the northwest neighborhoods of Austin and North Lawndale. These two neighborhoods are also high crime areas with centers of concentrated poverty and most residents living below the poverty level. Austin had the most incidents of violent crime in the Chicagoland area (Chicagopolive.org). The remaining two participants were from Calumet City and Joliet.

The average age for the men was 29.4 years. More than half of the men had not completed high school, n=13. Five of the men obtained their General Education Diploma (GED), a high school equivalency diploma for individuals who have not completed high school. The highest grade completed was two years of college. One participant was actively enrolled in college at the time of the interview.

The majority of men, n=15 were not employed at the time of the interview. Three had been laid off; either because they were in construction or had a holiday/seasonal job. All of the men cited their felony offense as a barrier to finding gainful employment. Of the five men who were employed at the time of the interview their employment type ranged from self-employment (carpentry and rehab work) to working for a temporary services agency to working in the kitchen of a major downtown hotel.

All of the men in the sample had children. The average number was 3.1 children. Only n=2 men stated that they were the primary caregiver for one or more children under the age of 18. The rest of the men, n=18, stated that their dependent children under the age of 18 lived with the mother of those children. Surprisingly, none of the men were court ordered to pay child support, however, all of the men said they voluntarily sent money to the mother of their children for support of the kids.

3.2 Summary of the Female Sample

The female participants were all African Americans currently on probation in Cook County stemming from a conviction of delivery and manufacture of a controlled substance. The average age of the women in the sample was 29.45. Of the 20 women, n=16 had graduated high school or obtained a GED. The highest level of education attained in the sample was 2 years of college. No one in the sample had completed any post-high school education. In terms of neighborhoods, the sample was almost evenly split with n=9 (45%) of the women coming from the south side of Chicago. Seven of the 9 were from Englewood, one was from Bronzeville and the other did not specify which neighborhood in the south side she was from. The other 55% (or 11 women) were from the northwest side.

One woman stated she was from the Rockwell Projects, four were from the Austin area, one from GarfieldPark, four from North Lawndale, and one from Logan Square. Most of the women n=16, were not employed at the time of the interview. Five of the women had no previous work history at all. Some of the women stated that they got by because of a spouse or significant other.

Not only did all of the women in the sample have kids, all, but one, were the primary caregivers of their children, and in some cases, their grandchildren. The average number of children amongst the women was 2.9 kids.

3.3 Motivations for Entrance to the Drug Trade

Not surprisingly, there was little variation in participant's reasons for entering the drug trade. Of the entire sample, only one male individual stated a different reason for entering the drug trade, saying: "It was exciting to me, I don't know, it was just something I always wanted to do. Growing up I saw the homies into it and it was exciting to me. It wasn't really about the money, it was about the lifestyle."

All of the other participants, both male and female, plainly stated "money" as their reason for entering the drug trade. However, there was considerable variation by gender when participants were asked how they entered the drug trade. Entering the drug economy on the coattails of the men in their lives was a theme amongst most of the females, and has been well documented in the existing literature (Alarid and Cromwell, 2006). "How I entered? Well I entered by a boyfriend I used to hang with. He sold drugs then I started helping him and then we both started using and then most of my drug selling was used to supply my addiction." (Female, 42 years old)

"The streets- I was in school and peers were buying drugs and spending money on it- and being in the wrong crowd. I didn't really know that was the wrong crowd at the time and all it took was for me to hook up with the wrong man who was motivated enough to want the money. His motivation motivated me. The money he made, the things he accomplished and not really seeing the consequences, I was like 'put me on' and he did." (Female, 54 years old)

"Well this dude I was with. I wasn't about to hoe for no money so this was kinda the next best thing. I wasn't degrading myself but at the same time I was getting money. And it helped me so much, it was just a big come up because before I was doing it I was scrimping and scraping and I couldn't get nothing. After, I was, you know...able to breath." (Female, 30 years old) "Holding stuff I ain't have no business holding. But when you see stacks of money all around you that makes you want it even more. That is one way of doing things and it's a quick way. But probably if I wasn't holding stuff for him I would not have even done it" (Female, 22 years old)

There were some women, n= 6, who reported entering the drug trade independent of men. They tended to be a little older and had prior arrests for drug related crimes. Their independent start or subsequent re-involvement in the drug economy may be a reflection of the desperation they felt, or perhaps a manifestation of their lack of opportunity leaving little other options for making money.

A significant portion of the men, n=17, reported starting out selling drugs at a very young age, usually having watched the older male figures on their street and on their block sell drugs. None of the men cited getting involved in the drug economy through a woman or by virtue of their association with a girlfriend or significant other. Therefore, entrance to the drug trade, for the purpose of selling has a gendered aspect to it. When women are relegated to support roles, as they often are in the drug economy, it is often *because* of their association with boyfriends. Assuming that since being a seller means occupying a different position in the drug economy; it should follow that women who sell gain entrance in a different way from women who hold or transport. However, their answers seem to indicate that there is one main way in and that is through a man.

There was clear consensus with regard to two topics. First, virtually all of the participants, male and female, stated that it was not, at all, difficult to get started in the drug trade. "Getting started" refers to the initial buying of the drugs to distribute on the streets as well as etching out space, or as some called "territory," to sell. Both men and women stated that as long as you had the initial start up money to buy your own drugs, it was not difficult to put it out on the street. None of the participants reported being confronted with violence regarding selling space or territory. The mere fact that these women and men were able to effortlessly drift into the drug economy speaks volumes to the social environment from which they come.

Second, all participants, except one, stated that there was no stigma attached to drug selling in their neighborhood. Drug selling was a part of the everyday fabric of the neighborhood and had become a normalized and routine occurrence for these individuals. In time, this normalization became a barometer to judge possible financial opportunities when the need became strong enough. This lack of stigma, in some ways, served to demystify the hustling lifestyle.

3.4 Gender Differences in Motivations for Selling

There was little gender difference in both the males and females explanations for selling. Most of the interviewees cited experiencing some type of financial constraint just prior to making the decision to sell or re-enter the drug trade after a period of absence. There was no clear gender difference in the type of constraints experienced, which varied from the birth of another child, to the loss of a job, to being evicted. One woman stated: “Even thinking about being on the streets, for real I cannot let that happen, but it happened. The kids had to walk to school from my mothers house and it was a long way cause we ain’t have no place else to go. [Were you able to get them on a school bus?] Eventually I was but the bus company took their sweet time to make that happen. But after that is when I started hustling, but the foul thing is the more I hustled I wasn’t able to get up outta there because everybody was askin me for money. So I was just in a deeper hole and the crazy thing was how I got out my mother’s house was due to getting housing not my hustle money. But yeah, that’s what I would say really got me involved in hustling.” (Female, 25 years old).

A much more noticeable distinction occurred when interviewees were asked how they spent their profit from selling drugs. It was far more common for the women (n=17) to have spent some, a majority, or all of their profits on their children or things that would contribute to the stability of themselves and their children. They reported spending the money they earned on things like clothes for their children, rent, contribution to the household expenses if they were living with someone else, transportation to get to work, paying outstanding bills and utilities, household items and toiletries.

“[With the profit you made, what type of things did you buy or spend your money on?] I spent my money on me and my kids. [Like what? What kinds of things did you buy?] Like clothes, shoes for the, cause I always kept my kids clean. Bills, my phone service, things like that. [Did you pay rent?] No, “Section 8” paid that cause I wasn’t working but I didn’t have a way to pay all of my other bills. It really wasn’t that much I was getting, like people think.” (Female, 27 years old)

“Clothes for me and my kids- stuff for the house and paid bills. But the house I lived in was owned already- so mostly stuff for my kids.” (Female, 44 years old)

“I paid my bills.” (Female, 19 years old)

“Well I used most of my money to take care of my kids. [How did you do this?] Well buying they food and clothes, keeping a roof over our head. Its unfortunate but I have to do all the work cause their father isn’t here. We got along well with the money from my job but when I moved out of my mother house it wasn’t enough. They cut my hours like almost as soon as I moved out and she had gave me a deadline so I couldn’t go back. (Female, 22 years old)

“Taking care of everything! More like what wasn’t I taking care of. Of course my kids came first and everything I did for them from clothes to transporting to everything.” (Female, 30 years old)

“At the point that I am, its just all about my kids and grandkids. I been trying to find another way but when you my age with no work history, um this is what you go back to. Its quick money and I can pay the bills that I need to. I big part of everything is taking care of my daughter and her two cause man it’s hard. So I spend a lot on her and when any of my kids need something they come to me and I find a way to get it. I had to give money toward bailing my son out in Indiana. When the kids have little trips and stuff for school. Buying everybody clothes and stuff. I still buy my grown sons clothes. I am the go to person.” (Female, 44 years old) “I spoiled myself and my kids. I felt we deserved it. That sounds bad right? I did pay some bills to with it. But honestly, I spent it on us (Laughing).” (Female, 25 years old)

For most of the women, their first and almost automatic response to any money motivated questions in the interview had to do with the care of their children. They maintained that the struggle, at some point, got to be too much for them and that they were desperate to find a way to make ends meet. Being on the brink of homelessness and not having any job prospects necessitated their drug selling activity. One woman, who was sanctioned by the Illinois Department of Health & Human Services, for failing to report income from a job she held one year previous for 3 weeks, said the following:

“Well I was a runner. [What’s that?] I just mainly moved the drugs from one place to another. [So you never sold drugs?] No, I did, but my main thing was to move work back and forth. I was selling at times but running was safer because you didn’t always have nothing on you but when I was selling it was either because I needed last minute money or cause I was doing a favor to someone else. But to answer your question, I was paying bills with my money. I was worsen off because I didn’t have no type of income. [Some of the other people talked about getting state aid, did you get that?] I was getting it but I got cut off because I aint tell them I was working- and it was at a ‘White Hen’ for 3 weeks! So I was like ‘Yo!’ they for real. The kids got the medical but we couldn’t get nothing else so all my money was going for that. [Did you have your own place?] Yes and no- it was my brother’s apartment but he’s away in the army. So I had to pay all of those bills. [Did he ever help you any?] Nope- he got his own child support to pay. He just said make sure I was on time with the rent and don’t tear his house up.”

Three of the women reported spending the majority of their profits on activities in which they were the primary beneficiary, such as, going out to nightclubs, shopping for clothes for themselves, and other miscellaneous social items. Two of the three women were teen mothers. It is quite possible that having children at such an early age interfered and deferred to a later time, the typical fun associated with being a teenager, as witnessed in their carefree approach and detached sense of parental responsibilities. They did not seem strained by their single parenthood. Although the third woman was not a teen parent, she spoke of having to care for 8 siblings and the strain it placed on her and her older sister after her parents died.

“That was a long time ago. Back then when I first started I had nothing to do with my money but spoil myself. My man at the time took good care of me with the money cars and houses, so it was up to me what I wanted to do. My sister had my kids and so even though it’s sad to say I know she was taking good care of them. That’s the evolution that God brought me through cause I was selfish back then. But if you look at the time period, I was the second oldest of 8 siblings. So it was always about taking care of them. I got sick of it and eventually just left my sister to do it all. [Ok, what about this recent arrest, what did you do with the profits you made from when you were selling drugs most recently?] Paying my roommate. I had to pay for my room and my cell phone bill. I don’t really have too many other bills” (Female, 54 years old) “Just normal everyday keeping myself up [What things did you do to keep yourself up?] Got my hair and nails done, shopping. [Anything else?] I went out clubbing, driving all over, paying my car note and insurance.” (Female, 25 years old)

“I was using my money to have fun. And a lot of it, now that I look back, I just wasted. Just giving money to people - \$30 or \$50 here or there, eating out...we had this thing when we would just go buy cell phones, the nice ones and hold on to ‘em because we was always losing them. [did any of your money go to the kids or for like household bills?] Yeah, I was supporting my kids, and half of my girlfriends kids. We lived with my mother and she was taking care of the other stuff.” (Female, 23 years old)

Giving credence to the hypothesis, men were much more likely to say that they spent the majority of profits on themselves, material possessions, and activities they thought of as fun. These activities included, buying clothes, sneakers, jewelry, cars, alcohol, and marijuana, as well as going to “strip clubs” and nightclubs. [With the profit you made, what did you spend your money on?] Half of it I jagged off. [Like what?] Liquor, partying, strip clubs, trips outta town, vehicles that got impounded...” (Male, 28 years old) “Shoes, jewelry...basically a lot of shoes and jewelry. I bought liquor, the finest weed, a bunch of material stuff, women clothes...(Male, 28 years old) “Clothes and crap. Going out every weekend, gambling, hittin the after hours spot for gambling, dice, card, dominos. Eatin, wasn’t nobody cookin for me and uh I was out most of the time. Uh, that’s about it. (Male, 29 years old)

“Mostly reinvestment, cause really I knew the more I put in, the more I was gonna get out. Nice car...lets see, what else? Helping out my foot soldiers to make them loyal, but we was all together, getting the money and spending it together. Matching custom made diamond chains- we got a lot of custom made stuff...” (Male, 26 years old)

“What I spent it on? Not nothing I can show for it today. Clothes, bills, lacing the house. You gotta realize that its all about seeing what you can get. So you not gon hold on to all the money- you spend it so you can have something to show for it.” (Male, 41 years old) “I’d pay the bills first, you know rent...then like material stuff- clothes, jewelry, shoes, and spend the rest on girls I guess.” (Male, 29 years old) “Car, clothes- sometimes I paid bills.” (Male, 21 years old)

“Shit, on me. [What sort of stuff did you buy for yourself?] Nice things I wasn’t able to get before. [Such as?] Clothes, sneakers, nice car...I laid it out. [What do you mean?] My whip had trim, rims, grill, all that...[Is that all?] Well shit, you know, we was making it rain in the strip spot.” (Male, 32 years old)

“Bought cars, I always bought cars. I had my own homes, clothes, flat screens, 2-3 cars. I always helped my momma and ” (Male, 24 years old.)

It is worth noting that once it became apparent to some male participants that the way they spent their profits might have “looked bad,” some amended or supplemented their answer to include a portion of the money going to the care of their children but it was always after they gave their answer to the question. Five of the men said they spent their profit on taking care of their children and/or trying to avoid homelessness. These men reported being the primary source of income for their household which typically included their girlfriend or mother of their children, as well as the children. “Paid bills, normal necessities, car, shoes, and clothes for the kids and car insurance.” (Male, 31 years old).

“First and foremost I paid my bills and I had a lot of them! I was spending a lot on my lady and my kids, you know they school stuff and wit not. There wasn’t a lot left after that.” (Male, 26 years old) “Money, money, money, money, money (interviewee singing)- that’s what it takes to support your family right? I’m not like most guys, my whole family was living with me, so all my money was going to the family thang. My children live with me, so without my money we all be homeless, you feel me? [So you were paying all the typical household bills with the money you made] Yeah, wasn’t no time for that fancy stuff, I’m to old to be stuntin, I was paying all the bare bones. I mean, cause all that flashy stuff, I already had it, I’m at a different point in my life.” (Male, 28 years old)

“Took care of my financial obligations. I been in school the last two years, so all the expenses for that. I pay child support and get my boy. I don’t mind that. I helped my momma out, she don’t get around as well as she used to, she need one of those ramps so I helped her out with that. A car, to get back and forth to school. And all my house bills, I live alone so everything is on me.” (Male, 40 years old)

One interviewee in particular was adamant that contrary to common misconceptions regarding women and single parenthood, it is not only women who provide the majority of support for the children. He emphasized his dedication to his children by pointing out that even though he was dying of stage 4 lung cancer, he still was out in the streets selling to be able to support them. He seemed to take his role as a father very serious, saying: “Uh, mostly supporting my kids, I’m saying, that’s why I was doing it anyway. The kids were coming and I had to find away. [So the profit you made mostly went to the care of your children?] Well what you think? And I got 9 kids! I was supporting them and they mommas. I always hustled to pay for my kids and if there wasn’t nothing out there for me to do legally, then I had to do what I had to do. But people think “oh, he got all those kids” like that automatically make someone a dead beat, but that wasn’t my case cause I took care of mine. See people only giving credit to the mothers, but I take good care of my kids. I got them in private school and all of that, they don’t never want for nothing. I’m a star dad and it even get to a point where my baby moms- her *and* her boyfriend living up off of me! It don’t bother me cause I’m a provider. [Has that changed as a result of your illness?] Of course it has, but we not talking about that. I still support my family and anyway ALL my baby mommas is doing something with theyself.” (Male, 42 years old)

I used a very direct question to get at the participants motivations for selling drugs: “would you say that you sold drugs more for your survival or to live well/comfortably, for instance to be able to buy the material goods you desire?” While recognizing that this decision can be made up of a very complex set of circumstances and motivations, this study takes the approach that this decision is principally guided by financial need/desires. Recall the earlier interview question “why did you start selling drugs?” to which 97.5% of the sample gave a financially driven answer. A logical follow up question would containa probe that asks the participation about the extent to which their financial need drove them to this form of criminal coping, i.e. was selling drugs necessary for survival or to get you the things you desired. All of the women and 17 of the men, 92.5% of the sample named survival as the catalyst to selling drugs.

3.4.1 Pressures, Constraints, and Caregiver Responsibilities

This study sets out, not to make a cause and effect statement concerning why Black men and Black women ultimately make the decision to sell drugs, instead the focus is on the conditions that exist in their environments to increase the likelihood of this form of criminal coping. This disjunction gives way to increased strains and pressures for those least able to achieve these wants and desires. One very predictable source of strain that may impede one's ability to have access to wants and desires is children. Ninety five percent of the female sample, $n=19$, were the primary caregiver for their children or grandchildren. The participants were asked to answer several questions about financial and familial strain. When asked who was financially responsible for the household, all of the women, $n=20$, stated that they were, even if they were currently residing with a partner. None of the women reported paying child support. Despite 100% of the women being under the federal poverty guideline of \$18,310 for a family of three (Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), only 6 of the 20 considered and labeled themselves as "poor." The rest of the women, $n=14$, did not identify themselves as poor. As long as they were able to adequately provide for their children. Receiving some form of public assistance did not impact how the women viewed their financial position. Admittance of being poor, as subjective as the term is, was equated with somehow not being a good parent. In 2009, 10.5% of U.S. families were living under the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Participants were then asked whether they were the primary caregiver for their minor children, and if not, whether they paid child support for children not residing with them. Most of the sample of women, $n=17$, said they did not receive financial support from the fathers of their children. The 3 women that did report receiving some money from the fathers were actually residing with them. The two women who were caring for their grandchildren both said the fathers of those children were not contributing to their financial support. This means that these women were responsible for providing for all of the children's immediate needs as well as all of the money required to maintain a household. Add to this the "domestic" duties placed solely on them: educational responsibilities for the children, maintaining employment, and housekeeping. These same pressures seemed to escape the men in the study.

The men did not seem to have as many financial concerns and worries as the women, despite also being under the federal poverty guideline. Very few of them were responsible for maintaining their own household or independently taking care of their children, but instead lived with someone else who was primarily responsible for the household bills. This was usually their mother or a girlfriend. Besides the two men that reported being the primary caregiver of their children, the rest said that their children lived with their mom. Although the two men that had physical custody of their children did not discuss the circumstances surrounding that arrangement, they did seem to embrace being the primary custodian and described having some of the same parental worries and burdens as the women in the study.

When it came to paying child support, all of the men said they provided financial support for their children, whether court ordered or not and despite the fact that 75% of the male sample was unemployed. Surprisingly, only 3 men said they were under court ordered child support. No details were given as to if they were current in their orders or in arrears.

One question expected to tease out a gender difference was "Do you feel pressure to look, act, possess certain things considered or associated with success?" Participants were prompted to elaborate and in these explanations no clear pattern emerged and both the men's and women's answers were quite scattered. Answers transcended gender and ranged from feeling no pressure at all, to feeling pressure to keep one's kids "up" to feeling "a lot of pressure to look good."

Overall, the men reported not feeling pressured to provide for the family. Most of the men, $n=14$, said they did not feel pressure to provide for their family versus, 19 of the women who said they *did* feel pressure to provide. For the men, this could be attributed to wanting to convey the overall feeling that they had their financial responsibilities under control. It could also be the result of the actuality that the men had less pressure to provide for the family because the majority of them were not responsible for the day to day care of their children. Whereas, the women were faced with life altering decisions and duties that ranged from avoiding eviction to figuring out where they were going to get money from next it all rested on their shoulders. Next, is a look at how these sobering realities sometimes conflicted with ultimate life goal or resulted in the renegotiation of their American dream.

3.5 Success Goals/Impact of the American Dream

One aim of this research is to explore how interviewees in the sample define success and how their standards may differ from mainstream notions of success. Historically and contemporarily, criminologists have studied how subcultures originate, perceive, and maintain ideas relative to the subculture (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Johnstone, 1978; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993). Surprisingly, there was little support for the hypothesis that drug sellers have their own formulated version of the American Dream. Typical success status indicators associated with the middle class were common to the women and men in the sample. However, there was a discrepancy between what the men admitted spending their drug profit on and their ultimate material goals.

The men in the study overwhelmingly reported spending their drug profits on material items that held no appreciative value (with maybe the exception of the jewelry). They engaged in activity that led to them losing their money as quickly as they earned it, for example, gambling, drinking and splurge shopping, rather than activity that could potentially enhance net worth or further earning potential.

For example, 90% of the male sample indicated that owning a home, property, or having one's own business was a material success indicator. Moreover, a significant portion indicated that owning property or a business could lead to their exiting the drug economy and pursuing legitimate business opportunities. Yet, none of the sample reported using their profit money for this purpose.

Therein lies the most common misconception about street level dealers- the notion that these individuals are pocketing enormous profits due to selling drugs, when in reality the profit is akin to wages earned from a minimum wage job (MacCoun and Reuter, 1992). Even though the profits made by the male sample were often spent on grandiose leisure activities and purchases, it belies the fact that these men were unable to achieve the traditional American dream, either because it was not on their radar or because they rejected it. The women in the sample had varied responses to the material indicators of success question. Eight of the women, or 40%, had very specific responses that centered on the outward appearance of a person.

Although, the participant's views were aligned according to traditional middle class measuring rods, their expectations for a "good life" were very much about survival. Most of the interviewees said that a "good life" to them simply meant being able to meet their most basic needs without the tremendous obstacles they face everyday. Extravagances such as, homes, vacations, and cars were hardly mentioned. The answers focused on easing the struggle. This is especially telling since this question was designed to evoke indulgences that this population ordinarily does not have excess to, but might hope to have to one day.

4. Discussion

The objective of this study was to expand the research on anomie theory, the American dream, and gender studies, by explaining the experiences of Black women and men adults with drug convictions. Because American society encourages a highly material driven culture, gender divided differences may further illustrate the burdens of women, especially Black women, in American society and the strains they encounter to support children and other dependent persons. They may be a casualty of the material arms race as primary responsibility for the private sphere historically and currently, has fallen on their shoulders. For men, this material emphasis takes the form of "commodity worship" (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2007). The material desires of inner city Black males is influenced and prioritized by those around them. It is organized according to superficial characteristics that are ordered according to the community. The desire to accumulate wealth and material goods pervades all aspects of American life, including those living in poverty. This unevenness, this gap between people who are at the bottom rung of achievement and the top rung consisting of a privileged few, explains why crime rates are so high in American culture. I propose that this gap is also largely responsible for individuals that use drug selling as a means to cope criminally. It is precisely because no one is excluded from the American Dream, that most pursue its tenets by any means necessary. High crime rates are a natural function of the marriage between this exclusion and economic dominance.

Consistent with prior research, the pathway into crime for women is different than for men. The primary pathway for Black women into deviant networks is through relatives and domestic networks. Black women have been forced to shoulder a great deal of responsibility of the Black family (Wilson, 2009). One way this added stress is reflected is through the utilization of criminal coping, especially in crimes with a financial end, such as theft, credit card/check fraud, in an attempt to bring at least some financial stability to the family.

This phenomenon is even more apparent when we look at drug selling. While there were a number of desperate situations that catapulted both men and women to this crime, women more often had to shoulder the direct burden of dependent others, i.e. children and family, as they almost exclusively had custody of the children. Women were far more constrained than the men and were more concerned with meeting the needs of dependent other. The men were more self-concerned and more often impacted by those around them, which tended to be other men they viewed as role models and neighborhood peers.

The women were more often forced to deal with instant catastrophes like avoiding eviction, homelessness, and providing necessary and basic needs to their children. Even though, there were a few men who also expressed these same emergency circumstances, it did not nearly approach the number of women that had to deal with these issues on a daily basis.

Insufficient financial support was a staple in these women's lives and they were faced with the harrowing decision of succumbing to the distress or finding a way to make ends meet. Giving in to circumstance (no financial resources and few legitimate options to make money) might have resulted in homelessness and in some cases, hunger. It is clear that the illegitimate options available to them, specifically drug selling, were most plausible. Selling drugs is usually not regarded as an impulse crime, but looked upon as a crime in which very deliberate actions are taken to engage in this economy. However, for these women a rational choice decision it was not, instead it was utilized to avoid familial financial catastrophe. Whether they were reamed into the business slowly by a boyfriend or made a quick decision to get fast money, one thing is clear: the women were more concerned with providing for their children than obtaining high end material status indicators. That is apparent in both their stated reasons for selling and the way they spent their profits. This is not to say that the women were impervious to material pressures, but that they prioritized their needs, putting their "absolute" strain first as opposed to succumbing to relative deprivation. The same cannot be said for the men in the sample.

There was a strong commitment to material success indicators for men. This was indicated in the response that the men gave about how they spent their profits. They more often chose to spend their profits on material goods such as cars, clothes, and jewelry. Even though both men and women overwhelmingly stated that their motivation for selling was mainly survival, this did not translate in how the men spent their money.

The number one benefactors of their profits were themselves, not the people around them, such as their children and family. This is not meant to cast a negative depiction on these men but instead it is meant to show how internalized and perpetuated gender roles make women responsible for the family and men responsible for outward signs of achievement and success, even if it is in a criminal context. It also lends support to the universal commitment to the material goals of American society, and although this concept seems fairly ambitious and selective, poor Black males have neither been insulated nor excluded from this process (socialization). Through various mediums of propaganda, media, formal institutions of social control, and peer groups, inner city youth and adults have been affected by the race to accumulate material goods. "People are willing to do anything to get ahead...those who cannot succeed become willing to risk everything, including a prison sentence (Siegal and Walsh, 2011)."

The women and men in the study expressed awareness of the mainstream American dream. Most had the same or similar hopes and dreams as middle class folk, indicating the influence is cross cultural. Conversely, the gap between aspirations and success achievement is much wider for poor Black folk. This is true even when they are aiming for the most modest of success goals. The social inequity faced by this group cannot be reiterated enough. The combination of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and racial isolation is all, directly or indirectly, a function of mass incarceration, especially in the city of Chicago.

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