

Reflections on three decades of research on ‘social supply’ in the UK

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Abstract

This chapter reviews how forms of friend and acquaintance supply that might be considered less than ‘drug dealing proper’ are not new and have existed over many years. It reflects on how, over time, views on these types of supply have developed and evolved in concert with changed and changing drug use and supply landscapes in the UK. In particular it considers the shift from some early forms of socially engaged recreational drug use and supply that were often bleeding, culturally, into myriad forms of counter culture and sat, to some degree at least, outside the everyday norm, to the sea change from the 1990s where a relatively normalised context around recreational drug use and some forms of friend/acquaintance supply moved more normatively towards the centre even for some parts of the criminal justice system. Following a consideration of how social supply has evolved over time the chapter culminates with an argument for a broadening of the concept to *minimally commercial supply* as a somewhat more refined position and that criminal justice approaches to non-commercially orientated supply need a more research evidence based framework for effective understanding and response.

1 Introduction

“Dealing was different in those days: no violence, no rip-offs, people actually trusted each other. When you bought or sold, dealer and client invariably sat down and got stoned together – partly sampling the wares but partly social. Nowadays it all seems to be ‘sell and run’.” (‘Harry’, the Cannabis Dealer, circa 1990, in Dorn et al. 1992, 3).

This quote sums up Harry’s disappointment at what he perceived to be the disappearance of a ‘social age’ of drug use and friendly supply as the 1980s turned into

the 1990s. Yet in fact, the social supply of drugs through the channels of friendship networks (or ‘friends of friends’), dependent upon individuals providing guarantees of trustworthiness and non- or minimally-profit orientated transactions, have all persisted and, in a broader societal context, evolved. This chapter draws upon interviews and impressions from research spanning over three decades. It initially situates the discussion in the post-1960s sociological research literature that presented a social model of drug use as opposed to the then dominant psychopathology approaches and moves on to consider the emergent ‘normalisation’ of both certain types of drug use and drug supply. These developments opened up and changed patterns, locations and styles of recreational drug use – from dance drugs to cocaine, to strong varieties of cannabis – and with them nuances in patterns of social supply, some of which have strong echoes of Harry’s golden days. This early literature features various descriptions of users and dealers who ‘drifted in and out’ of their networks and of groups based on systems of trade, trust and minimal profit. Following this, we consider how the idea of social supply as a significant aspect of the wider drug market came to be more thoroughly explored and conceptually formalised in the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s to inform an analysis of social, and minimally commercial supply, in the more recent context, drawing on the authors’ research into cannabis supply among young people, club drug supply among friend networks and even the supply of heroin among user-dealers.

2 Back to the ‘60s and ‘70s – drug use as psychopathy or social?

During the 1960s and 1970s the British drug policy landscape was slowly but surely re-shaped as a result of a modest (at least by later measures) rise in heroin use. Policy debate and direction largely applied to the treatment system and very much reflected a view of the world as seen from London (Ruggiero & South 1995; Mott 1991; Pearson 1991). However, more broadly speaking, liberal and conservative positions concerning drugs, morality, young people and the changing times generally revolved around ‘soft’ drugs (Ruggiero & South 1995; Measham & South 2012). Although fears of ‘gateways’ and ‘escalators’ were already expressed – cigarettes leading to marijuana, LSD leading to heroin, and so on – drug policy and legislation could find some comfort in a fairly simple dichotomisation of a world of hard drugs and soft drugs supplied by evil pushers to foolish and naive consumer users. Debates aired around these dichotomies were reflected in the core distinction made in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 between the offences of possession and supply.

The 1960s opened a window into a world of more colourful possibilities than the post-war period of rationing and reconstruction had offered. For some, full-blown politics of leisure and liberation were being explored with counter-culture guides like Richard Neville's *Playpower* (1970) featuring chapters with titles like "Johnny Pot wears gold sandals and a black derby hat" (Dorn & South 1989, 172-177). Sociological accounts of drug use and its meanings for participants still approached the subject via the category of 'deviance' but began to shift from positivist and functionalist accounts which relied on the language and diagnoses of 'normlessness', 'impulsivity' and psychopathy (Young 1971). The newly emerging sociology of deviance located drug use and users within a framework which tried to understand meanings and values from the point of view of the participants and the *social* character of drug culture(s). Earlier sociological perspectives had offered possible explanations for drug use in terms of retreat or withdrawal into personal and private spaces and experiences (Merton 1957, Cloward & Ohlin 1960) but the new labelling theories and related interpretative approaches placed users in the social contexts in which they lived, worked and had fun (Becker 1963, Finestone 1957) or else within an understanding of the alternative value systems that users felt they were developing and representing. Becker's important contributions in *Outsiders* (1963) were based on observation and interviews with jazz musicians and others who smoked marijuana. This was interpreted as an emphatically social experience, involving introduction into a social circle or network, learning about a drug, its use and how to enjoy its effects and, in the face of moral and legal disapproval and prohibitions, engage in rituals of secrecy to secure supply and continued use. In the UK, Young (1971; 1973a) applied this kind of perspective in his work on 'bohemian' middle-class subcultures of drug use in London in which he saw the 'use of drugs, sexual excess, lack of planning or deferment of impulse' as related to a 'general subterranean value' of short-term hedonism. This celebration of the social and playful dimension of drug use was an important counter-view to clinical and psychological determinism but could itself be hard to align with the real experience of ordinary users who were perhaps in some ways better described by Plant (1975, 258) in his study of non-metropolitan *Drugtakers in an English Town*:

"The study group was so varied that no single theory adequately explains their behaviour. Most did not seem problematic in terms of the factors examined. *Often, drug taking was simply a leisure activity or a token of idealism.*" [emphasis added]

As Ruggiero and South (1995, 133-134) pointed out, regardless of the popular images of 'youth in revolt' right across Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

“...in reality, only a relatively small percentage of youth were aligned with political groups or fully fledged counter cultures. Similarly, the extent of drug use was quite modest when compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, although frequently associated with oppositional groups and protest, drug use also had expressive and functional value for groups that in other respects were seriously conformist – for example, the Mods who worked by day and raved at weekends.”

Questions of social choice vs determinism and pathology re-emerged in the 1980s in the context of increases in unemployment and a dramatic rise in heroin use, but the correlation between the two while clear in some cases was not a matter of simple, direct causality. Social and economic constraints apply to shape opportunities and culture, but actors exercising choice make of these conditions what they can. This is the case in social worlds of recreational drug use as much as anywhere else. South (2004, 529) reports on one group of low-paid and insecurely employed recreational users that:

“...there is a question here about the nature of the choices being exercised i.e. what rewards and satisfactions are being sought and prioritised – those deriving from legal market-place success or those from the valuing of leisure/pleasure? One clear answer is that: ‘most of the smokers [cannabis] and clubbers [users of ecstasy, amphetamines and cocaine] I know are doing naff jobs - labouring, office work, shop assistants... they're too busy having a good time to make the effort to achieve anything more’ (female, 19yrs).”

This expression of ‘choice’ is at variance with Merton’s (1957) category of market place ‘failure’ as an explanation of ‘retreat’ into pathological drug use and is closer to the pursuit of enjoyment and sensation described by more recent cultural interpretations offered by Katz (1988) or Collison (1996) but of course, ‘choice’ still has to be placed in the context of constraints and influences.

3 Low-profit dealing: trading charities and mutual societies

Studies of some forms and sources of drug supply from the late 1960s and 1970s onward remarked on the ways in which a counter cultural ethic was combined with a spirit of alternative entrepreneurship – as if a counter economy could be created and could now co-exist, even if uncomfortably and inefficiently so (see e.g. the discussion of ‘hippy economics’ in Young 1973b). Leigh (1985, 29) described Hashish, bought from Lebanon or Pakistan, in the following way: “It’s the great liberating drug. Selling it isn’t a business. It’s more like a crusade!” Langer’s (1977, 384) study of drug entrepreneurs and dealing in Melbourne in the

mid-1970s found that dealers in psychotropic drugs “moved from a hang-loose ethic linked with the values of the counterculture to a specific attitude which sanctions the accumulation of profit for services rendered”. However, the embrace of entrepreneurship did not always align with personal inclinations or the occupational problem of temptation:

“Entrepreneurial practices related to marketing behaviour have not been entirely coordinated or systematised... For example, there is much waste of their product through constant personal use, gift-giving of entertaining.” (ibid.)

Drug use and friendship-based dealing can be integrated into everyday life and routines, comfortably coexisting “with (...) conventional roles and activities” as Murphy et al. (1990, 321) report in their study of U.S. cocaine sellers, where the “use of illicit drugs had gone on for so long, was so common in their social worlds, and had not significantly affected their otherwise normal lives, [that] they hardly considered it deviant at all”. In other U.S. case studies, Reuter et al. (1990) and Hagedorn (1994) provide examples of those working as dealers in the illegal market but who make irregular forays back into legal employment with varying degrees of success. In the UK, this phenomenon might be mirrored in varying ways by those in similar situations in the informal economies that bridge illegal and legal markets and include those involved in mutual assurance of supply and low- or non-profit trading of drugs – “mutual societies” and “trading charities” in the terms used by Dorn et al. (1992, 10-13). Pearson’s (2001) in-depth ethnography of an “adult network of recreational drug users in inner-London” describes how users sociably managed the normative continuum of conventionality accepted within their network, as reflected for example in conversations about relationships and weddings, the use of cannabis to overcome boredom at work or cocaine to liven up a holiday, to stories about selling counterfeit goods. Importantly though, those involved “did not think of themselves as ‘drug users’ – it is merely something that they do, or do not do, as an ancillary to other aspects of their lives, whether work or leisure... these were people for whom drug use was a peripheral but ‘normal’ aspect of life” (ibid, 173).

By the early 1990s, Britain had developed what remains a pattern of predominantly ‘polydrug’ use. Mixing drugs, selection for different effects, and/or use of alternatives to the preferred ‘drug of choice’ in times of scarcity, were not in themselves new phenomena. What was new was the integration into young people’s drug cultures of a pick ‘n’ mix approach to a growing repertoire of increasingly available legal and illegal drugs at reduced price across the 1990s (Parker et al. 1998; South 1999). The ecstasy dance culture involved ‘ordinary’ people

whose 'deviance' lay in being weekend enthusiasts of dance music and dance drugs but without pre-existing offending careers or drug dependency (Shapiro 1999; Sanders 2005; Hunt et al. 2010). Parker et al. (1998) have suggested that a process of 'normalisation' of 'recreational' drug use was under way from the early 1990s within the lifestyles and attitudes of the adolescents that they surveyed. 'Normalisation' does not mean 'everyone' is now a drug user, nonetheless acquaintance with 'recreational' drugs and/or users is no longer unusual and drug users are as likely to come from a range of 'normal' backgrounds across the social spectrum as be linked to categories of the socially excluded. Debates about whether or not we have seen a widespread normalisation of use or process of 'cultural normalisation' (Pearson 2001) are important (South 1999; 2004) and have led to the further refining of the concept of normalisation (Aldridge et al. 2011; Measham & Shiner 2009). The idea has also been applied in other cultural contexts such as Denmark (Jarvinen & Demant 2011), Finland (Hakkarainen et al. 2007), Australia (Duff 2005; Pennay & Moore 2010; Wilson et al. 2010) and New Zealand (Hutton 2010).

Normalisation underpins contemporary forms of supply and use where these are not seen as 'abnormal' by those involved and/or where those involved have a clear personal (moral, political, social) standpoint that supports the idea that supply and use as behaviour should be permitted. In one set of interviews carried out in the early 2000s (South 2004) all respondents saw drug use as a 'normal' feature of their day-to-day approach to 'life management'. Importantly for them, the context of "cultural normalisation" (Pearson 2001; South 1999) is one in which regular drug use is seen as by no means incompatible with the normatively valued aims and aspirations of 'making it' in the legal marketplace and all these respondents had good jobs and managed their varied patterns of drug use in a successful balance with work demands and careers. Brian was part of a strong social circle in the gay scene, where trust, mutual support, sharing and the drugs-equivalent of 'round buying' were valued: "I have a good circle of friends doing that... if somebody doesn't have money I buy, if I don't have money, it kind of swings around... It might be [me] one week, the next week it depends on who has got it.' For Adam with a menu of drug choices that included 'cannabis, ... cocaine, ecstasy', his preference was to buy from 'friends' but he would also obtain drugs 'just in night clubs... whatever is easiest – cheapest.' Chris described obtaining drugs 'always through black market connections... Pot, I know people who grow it, so I can get it cheap... cocaine – always through someone that you know, rather than off the street'" (South 2004, 531-533).

The normalisation of drug use also introduces an element of normalisation into small-scale dealing, justified simply as social transactions between friends.

Life on the 'continuum of conventionality' blurs distinctions and there is a fuzzy area of overlap between the licit and the illicit.

4 Legal policy and policing

Regardless of the evidently social basis of much drug use and related culture in the 1960s and 70s, the fear of pathology and loss of control remained a defining feature of official responses. In the U.K, although other significant legislation on social matters in these 'permissive' years could be characterised as moving in the direction of liberalisation (for example laws concerning decriminalisation of homosexuality, legalisation of abortion, easing of divorce laws and abolition of capital punishment), drugs received quite conservative treatment. This was notably exemplified in the dismissive rejection of a call from the respectable Advisory Council on Drug Dependence (the Wootton Committee 1968) for relaxation of the law on cannabis (Young 1971, 198–201). By and large, for succeeding decades, this is the direction in which drug policy, legal classification and the tariff of penalties has tended to continue to go (even when there have been one or two steps in a different direction these have been quickly reversed). Although police, customs and intelligence analysts appreciate there is diversity in the drug market this can, to be fair, be hard to translate into clear legal language. So the default positions have been either 'homogeneity', all drug dealing is the same, favoured by those supporting the logic of the 'drugs gateway' thesis and appealing to those like parents groups and popular media. The other default is the pyramidal hierarchy model with small scale, local dealers at the bottom and Mr Big at the top. One of the key points of the new wave of critical drug market research from the 1980s onward was that the pyramid model needed to be demolished as it was a poor reflection of reality (Reuter 1983; Dorn et al. 1992).

From the mid-1980s, the principles of a harm reduction approach began to be taken up across not only health and social care agencies but also (some) police forces (Fraser & George 1992). Harm reduction can be defined as the idea that policies, programmes, services and practices can be devised that can help to reduce health, social and economic harms to individuals, communities and society that are associated with the use of drugs (Newcombe 1992). The acceptance of (at least) some features of this approach by police forces led to cautions and to processes for the onward referral of drug users to helping agencies. On the one hand, where it was taken up, this was a very significant development, 'reaching out' rather than 'driving away'. On the other hand, this was simply an updated response to the bifurcation at the heart of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, providing

support for users, perhaps tolerating some minor possession, but remaining in pursuit of all sources of supply. Only in recent years have there been signs of more radical guidance being contemplated to guide enforcement and court proceedings as they affect users who may be engaged in social supply to other users – and this is discussed below.

5 The development of social supply practices and social supply as a concept

By the late 1990s, various studies of drug markets and suppliers (e.g. Blum et al. 1972; Dorn et al. 1992; Murphy et al. 1990; Parker et al. 1998) had shown that not all dealers were the same and that for many, rather than the motivation for supplying drugs being that of commercial gain, many were in fact simply ‘sorting out’ friends. Some had what might be termed an ‘advocate’ position whereby they perceived certain types of recreational drug use (e.g. hallucinogens but also cannabis) as having positive outcomes for general well-being and consciousness expansion. Others, such as some ‘friend suppliers’, simply sold for little or no gain to those they knew, or acted as ‘go-betweens’ (Murphy et al. 1990; Coomber & Turnbull 2007) so as to help them buy/access drugs and (for some) thus protect them from the perceived ‘dangers’ of contact with the ‘drug dealer’. As we have already seen, research on large cohorts of adolescents in the north of England carried out by Parker and colleagues reported that the supply of drugs among young people was extensively supplied from, and between, friends and acquaintances (Parker et al. 1995 & 1998; Parker 2000). The young people described by this and other research since, as well as many of the suppliers previously described by Dorn et al. (1992), Murphy et al. (1990) and Blum et al. (1972), simply didn’t fit the stereotype of the ‘drug dealer’ enshrined in the laws around supply and the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. In essence, and in contrast, these individuals were non-predatory, not ‘commercially’ motivated, and supply was inextricably related to the cultural mores of the groups they belonged, or connected, to (cf. Coomber & Turnbull 2007).

In 2000, as a response to this obvious disjunction, the Police Foundation published its report *Drugs and the Law: the Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971* and in it put forward the opinion that too many of those prosecuted for supply offences differed in meaningful ways to the kind of supplier (‘drug dealer’) that the Act was designed to encapsulate and prosecute and recommended that:

“There should be a separate offence of dealing, the main ingredient of which would be the pattern of activity of illicitly transacting business in drugs. The offence should be capable of being charged as a continuing offence so that the prosecution can show that the defendant has been dealing over a period of time by putting before the court evidence of the true scope and nature of his activities” (Police Foundation 2000, 63).

This unease, occurring in the late 1990s and early 2000s, around how well the laws on supply offences distinguished between suppliers also coincided and coalesced with a growing sense that the relative normalisation of drug use (among young people in particular) meant that recreational users were increasingly vulnerable to being caught up in legislation not designed for them in the first place and that, as a consequence, they could suffer long-term negative life-chances as a result. By May 2002, the term ‘social supply’ had begun to be used in official discourse on differentiated supply as discussed by the UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Home Affairs that year, and the following year, Hough et al (2003) contextualised the idea further in relation to the burgeoning practice of small scale home cultivation of cannabis.

Reporting on research that had looked closely at the small scale cultivation of cannabis for personal use ‘and use with friends’, Hough et al argued that there seemed to be a convincing argument for treating ‘home-grown’ cannabis cultivation of moderate amounts as possession rather than as dealing and that seeing cultivators/users of this kind as sellers was possibly problematic when their actual practice was looked at closely. After an examination of different forms of involvement in cannabis cultivation at modest levels (e.g. the sole grower cultivating for personal use; those growing to provide therapeutic cannabis; or more commercially motivated sellers), Hough et al. saw value in describing social supply in a way similar to that previously outlined by the Police Foundation (2000, 36) and specifically as: “...defined as the non-commercial (or non-profit-making) distribution of cannabis to non-strangers”.

Further conceptual clarification emerged following research looking at the supply of cannabis among young people in three urban and three rural areas in England (Duffy et al. 2008). From this research, Coomber and Turnbull (2007) argued that almost all supply of cannabis among the young people in the sample was between friends and acquaintances and that the evidence strongly suggested that: young people using and supplying cannabis almost never came into contact with the ‘drug market proper’; that social supply acted as a structural buffer in this regard; and that this ‘market’ – for all practical purposes – ‘sits outside’ the adult, ‘sales for profit’-motivated drug market, as conventionally depicted and understood. It was further argued that, more than any other form of supply, young people’s supply of cannabis typified the difference between social supply and

drug dealing proper. In this kind of case, the potential application of the ‘drug dealer’ label to so many young people provided the clearest example of how the law could inappropriately capture too broad a segment of users as dealers, and left social suppliers open to the vagaries of politics and mood within the criminal justice system as to how severely a social supplier should or should not be punished. Although Potter (2009) has correctly pointed to some of the difficulties in distinguishing between ‘friends’ and acquaintances and the difficulties this can pose for the criminal justice system, it is the case that in recent years in the UK the sentencing guidelines have attempted to resolve this difficulty, having now accepted some of the key principles of social supply (Moyle et al. 2013).

Whilst some genuine progress has been made in the UK to accommodate social supply as a concept and apply this in relation to arrest, prosecution and sentencing practice, there are nonetheless a number of genuine problems with how this has been done. This has revealed some naivety and ignorance within the criminal justice system about the forms and practices that genuinely constitute social supply (cf. Moyle et al. 2013 for further explanation) resulting in continued disproportionate sentencing for some. One area where this is particularly true relates to those supplying non-recreational, addictive street drugs like heroin and crack cocaine.

6 Minimally Commercial Supply

For the most part, social supply has been associated with the supply of recreational substances such as cannabis, ecstasy, and other dance/club drugs, but the most recent conceptual shift (Coomber & Moyle 2013) has seen social supply developed into something more inclusive and broadened out to encompass the practice of supplying even highly addictive street drugs when that supply is, in essence, not motivated by profit as such and thus only *minimally commercial*. The extension of the concept into Minimally Commercial Supply (MCS) was considered necessary for two primary reasons: first, to address the ongoing tendency for the law to view social supply as fundamentally linked to an absence of profit and thus to prosecute those proven to have profited from supply, however moderately and, second, to bring into fuller consideration addicted drug users who supply drugs to other addicted drug users, *primarily to ensure they can reliably reproduce their own supply*. In Coomber and Moyle (2013) user-dealers as classified, commit fewer or no other types of crime, are non-predatory and sell only to a small(ish) group of other (known to them) addicted users and do so, once the costs of their own drug supply are taken into consideration, with only minimal personal

gain. Compared to those commercially/profit motivated dealers who may be predatory or have no structurally defined upper-limit to their client base, their culpability is argued to be less (see Moyle & Coomber 2015).

7 The modern day manifestation of social supply¹

Although much previous research on social supply in the UK has reported it as having a ‘best fit’ with cannabis users, social supply is now developing – or is established practice – in other recreational psychoactive drug markets, particularly in regard to club drugs such as MDMA, ecstasy and ketamine (Aldridge et al. 2011; Joe-Laidler & Hunt 2008) but also latterly, in relation to a range of New or Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) or so-called ‘Legal Highs’ (Coomber & Pyle 2015). Even so, while the substances exchanged – and the context in which a drug is supplied – may have changed over the years, in many instances the motivations and ways of ‘doing’ social supply in the UK appear to have much in common with that which has gone before.

In many instances a social supplier of recreational drugs is either a member of a group that has access to a supplier or may be a nominated person (sometimes ‘turns’ are taken) who will approach a known source. Notions of reciprocity and sharing still have a strong influence and if a member of a social group is already planning to obtain drugs through a source, particularly for an event in which numerous or all members of the group were attending, they would then be expected to provide for the rest of the group. Planning access to drugs for events is part of a user’s routine, and as such, acquiring drugs just for oneself will not generally represent a normative option for social suppliers (as defined here).

8 Sharing, Sociability, Profit and ‘Hassle’

Sharing recreational drugs is central to both use and supply activity. Explanations for drug sharing within social circles may revolve around notions of sociability and a desired shared experience including a more social way of *purchasing* drugs. However, while the principles of ‘doing it for the group’ are understood and the process of obtaining drugs might become routine, nonetheless the downside is also understood in the sense that social suppliers know that some risk is being

1 This section draws on findings reported in Moyle (2013), Coomber & Moyle (2013) and Coomber et al (2014).

taken and some extra effort on their part is required. For social suppliers the ‘profit’ to compensate for this extra effort can be conceptualised as minimal in two important ways: first, the proportionate amount of profit from a purchase is usually negligible compared to commercially orientated sales; second, in terms of the importance or motivation that ‘gain’ plays in the act of supply itself.

9 Conclusion: toward a research-based framework for understanding social supply

Social supply often involves strong social ties and social meanings that are, in essence, divorced from the actual exchange process but surround it with a social contextual framework. This is very different from the non-social exchange processes of commercial, profit-orientated suppliers and it is still in need of further examination and explanation – not least for legal and policy audiences.

In contrast to the recommendations of the Police Foundation Report (2000), but consistent with wider research (Nicholas 2008; Shearer 2005; Joe-Laidler & Hunt 2008), we argue that social supply is an activity that is not only present in cannabis networks but also highly prevalent in psychoactive Class A (and B) drug markets (particularly cocaine, ecstasy, MDMA and ketamine). Studies by Moyle (2013), Coomber and Moyle (2013), and Coomber et al. (2014), demonstrate that social suppliers will almost certainly have a core group of close friends that they will routinely distribute to and they may also supply to other acquaintances or ‘known faces’ who have been directed to the supplier by other contacts (this is similar to the findings of Hough et al. 2003). Consistent with Potter (2009), this creates a ‘grey area’ in the conceptualisation of drug supply behaviour and problematises traditional assumptions about the relationship between the supplier and the receiver of drugs, particularly in a legal context (Potter 2009). Another key implication is that it is *not* the quantity of substance that is of importance when defining social supply. For example, a large social group attending a festival or other events may make provision to obtain, hold and then distribute (i.e. supply) quite large amounts of drugs at one time. Given such scenarios, a threshold-based definition is probably not the most suitable basis for determining what is social supply rather than commercial supply. Instead, the intent or motivation should be considered as the primary indicator of the nature of the purchase (social supply or commercial supply).

The scope of the social supply act is perhaps wider than has been portrayed in the current research base (see Duffy et al. 2008; Coomber & Turnbull 2007; Hough et al. 2003). While it is undoubtedly the case that the roles undertaken by social suppliers are characterised by a certain level of diversity with regard to the

quantities and nature of the drug purchased, the way the substances are distributed, and the relationship with the receiver of the drug – it also seems likely that certain characteristics can be found as common. A social supply transaction or 'offence' would be likely to entail: the social supplier using the drugs that were being supplied; some element of gain such as 'free drugs' or a small sum as means of recompense for the effort of the social supplier; the transaction *not being primarily* motivated by the aim to gain financial profit; and the social supplier distributing drugs to friends, acquaintances or 'known individuals' (non-strangers) (Moyle 2013).

There is much more that needs to be pursued in this area of research and in policy debate and discussion concerning the concept of social supply. However some recognition has already occurred in the UK with the Sentencing Council inserting the notion of 'absence of any financial gain' as a characteristic of a 'lesser role' in the culpability matrix of their new definitive sentencing guidelines. This is an important start.

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