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‘A Sociological Approach to Understanding Drug Crime in Ireland’

Norma Kennedy

Joint Honours

The Economic boom from the beginning of this decade up until 2009 had many unforeseen consequences for Ireland. One of these was the alarming increase in the supply of, and demand for, recreational drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine. As a result, drug crime became the focus of political, media, and public concern. With little research invested in the topic of crime in Ireland and in particular drug crime, never has it been more crucial for sociologists to offer an in-depth understanding and explanation for this phenomenon. Using a sociological lens, this article attempts to offer an insight into drug crime in Ireland. First, by looking at the approach of theorists from within the Labelling Theory perspective such as Howard Becker, Symbolic Interactionists such as Erving Goffman and David Matza, and Sub-Cultural theorist Jock Young, the focus will be placed on micro-sociological studies of drug crimes to give a very thorough understanding of how the interpretations of both the drug dealers and the social audience impact on their behaviour. Second, the article will examine the work of macro-sociological theorists, such as Richard Quinney, Martin Spitzer, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton and Jock Young. These theorists from the new radical criminology perspective, ground their theories in Marxism. In examining both the advantages and disadvantages of both these perspectives, this article highlights the necessity to incorporate both micro and macro sociological approaches to enable a fully comprehensive understanding of drug crime in the Irish context.

Introduction

Crime has always been a universal problem and Ireland has seen a substantial growth in crime and in particular drug related crime over the last 10 years. Crime statistics show an increase of over 50% in controlled drug offences

between 2004 and 2009 (CSO statistics 2010). This was partially the result of the economic boom, which had brought about an increase in affluence. With more people being able to afford recreational drugs such as marijuana, heroin and cocaine, the drug problem escalated to the point where we saw an increase of 750% in the amount of cocaine alone coming into Ireland between 2003 and 2007 (Fitzgerald 2007). There is extensive research on crime at an international level, but in Ireland there has been little sociological research conducted on crime (O'Donnell 2009, p.4). This is noteworthy, as "sociological theorising is essential to the process of understanding crime because it engages with determinative realities that are otherwise often taken for granted and discounted" (O Mahoney 2000, p.4).

This article will engage in such theorising by focusing on drug crime in Ireland from two sociological perspectives in order to demonstrate how these theories can help us to critically understand this phenomenon. First, by looking at the approach of theorists from within the Labelling Theory perspective, such as Howard Becker, and Symbolic Interactionists such as Erving Goffman and David Matza, the focus will be placed on micro-sociological studies of drug crime. In particular the focus will be on the subjective interpretations of both the criminal actor and the social audience. Second, I will focus on the work of macro-sociological theorists, such as Richard Quinney, Martin Spitzer, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton and Jock Young from the radical criminology perspective, who ground their theories in Marxism. Theorists belonging to this perspective concentrate on social structures and the political dimensions to crime.

Labelling Theory

Labelling theorists, who study society through a micro-sociological lens, focus on the social interaction between the person's internal thoughts and emotions and their behaviour (Harrington 2005, p49). The emphasis is not placed on

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social structures and systems in trying to determine the causes of crime but rather looking at the behaviour of the criminal actors and the social audience to crime. According to Becker (1966, p.9), labels emerge from the processes of interaction and reaction between those committing crime and the other members of society involved, including the victim, the community, judges, law enforcers and law makers. The social rules by which society must live by in order to create social order are initiated by moral entrepreneurs who “force their own morals on others” (Becker 1966, p.148). These rules are shaped by cultural norms which are “social expectations about correct or proper behavior”, acquired by internalisation and socialisation (Abercrombie et al. 2000, p. 243). When these rules are infringed the inappropriate behaviour is labelled deviant. It is not the initial criminal act that makes the deviant resort to crime again but rather the reaction of society to his behaviour which Becker refers to a secondary deviance (Becker 1966, p.8). For example, on being convicted of the crime of drug dealing, the offender is labelled a criminal by the state, and as a result is ostracised by the law abiding members of society. This negative labelling socially redefines the offender because society treats the offenders’ stigma as his “master status” which overshadows all of his other personal characteristics (Goffman 1968, p.15). The offenders criminal stigma has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby the offender who may have once aspired to the values and beliefs of “normal society” believes that his criminal behaviour has now placed him on an unequal footing in comparison to the law abiding members of society, and he may thus believe that the stigma is justified (Becker 1963, p.34).

Extensive research on the attitudes of employers towards job applicants with previous criminal records would seem to suggest that those who obtain convictions usually experience difficulty gaining employment because of their criminal records and more often than not will be faced with the prospect of

resorting to crime in order to make ends meet (Schwartz and Skolnick 1962; Buikenhuisen and Dijksturius 1971; Boshier and Johnson 1974, cited in Farrington 1977, p123). Irish recidivism rates compiled in 2008 would support the assertion that offenders who have been convicted and served a custodial sentence have an increased probability of re-offending; with just over 25% of released prisoners back in jail within one yr and nearly 50% returning to prison within four years of their initial release (O'Mahoney 2008, p.4).

Stigma

While Becker helps us to understand why we label individuals as deviant, Goffman focuses on the subjective interpretations of the criminal actor and how they cope with the consequences of labelling – stigmatisation. Goffman (1968, pp.15-16) highlights how members of society apply stereotypes to stigmatised groups of individuals. This tends to facilitate a sense of separation between “us” and them,” implying that the labelled group (them) are inferior to law abiding citizens (us). For example, when becoming aware of an individual’s criminal behaviour, some people may assume that the offending person can no longer be trusted and that they are capable of far greater criminal acts now that they have begun their initiation into criminal activity. Degradation ceremonies within the criminal justice system such as handcuffing when arrested, court appearances, the media exposure of the court hearing, risk assessment procedures and incarceration are all contributing factors of stigmatisation (Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.449). Negative reaction from the rest of the community is derived from the negative meanings we attach to the particular stigma, which may result in the drug dealer being barred from popular and respectable bars, nightclubs etc. The more harm drug dealers cause in society the bigger the public disapproval and stigmatisation of the individual (Goffman 1963).

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Responses to deviant behaviour will vary from time to time, instigated by “drives” against certain deviances (Calhoun et al. 2008, p.52). Law makers may decide to have zero tolerance of certain crimes depending on the media coverage and the public outcry regarding that particular crime. However this public concern amplified by the media may not portray the true situation. For example in the 1960s drugs and in particular marijuana was portrayed by the media as dangerous with fatal outcomes for users (Young 2010a, p44.), even though there wasn’t any documented evidence of fatalities relating to this drug. In contemporary Ireland, the media coverage is focused not on the drug users but on the drug dealers, as can be evidenced by the State proclaiming a zero tolerance for all drug related crime. The powerful media have sensationalised the criminal activities of drug gangs which in turn has created a “moral panic” amongst citizens (Cohen 1972; Cohen and Young 1973). By highlighting criminal activities such as witness intimidation, money laundering, revenge killings etc., the media succeeded in portraying the drug criminals as fearless and a law unto themselves. Under pressure from their constituents the Government reacted quickly by fast tracking new crime surveillance and detention legislation in an attempt to crack down on this particular crime (see Criminal Justice Surveillance Act 2009; Criminal Justice Act 2006; Criminal Justice Act 2007). Very few offenders labelled as drug dealers manage to re-integrate back into conventional society because the label is strongly stigmatised and the offender may not have any other option but to become part of the sub-culture of drug crime (Becker 1966; Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.446).

Matza explains that the stigmatised have many ways of coping with their stigmatised identity. He refers to this process as “neutralisation” (Matza and Sykes 1957 cited in Henry 2009, p.59). The deviant individual who anticipates that they might be questioned after the deviant act will role play in conversation

with themselves to determine if their account of events will be believed or disbelieved. If the deviant decides to commit the deviant act because his excuses and justifications are credible should he be questioned afterwards, then these words will have acted as “vocabularies of motives” (Henry 2009, p.61). Matza and Sykes explain that “vocabularies of motives” contribute greatly to sub-cultures resetting the norms in such a way that societal deviance could become the norm for everyone in the criminal subculture. They further contend that this form of moral justification could end up neutralising the “moral bind of law” (Matza and Sykes 1957 cited in Henry 2009, p.58). For example the deviant would not view himself as a drug dealer but rather as a successful entrepreneur who happens to be supplying a popular product that is in high demand. He does not envisage any victims, as drug users are also lawbreakers. If he needs to eliminate any competition on his “home turf” through violent means then he simply excuses these actions by telling himself that they “had it coming to them” or “it was merely retaliation for hurting me and my lucrative business” (Henry 2009, pp.61-62).

Subcultures

Sub-cultural theorists focus on the subjective factor; how individuals and groups personally experience and interpret their particular cultural situation (Young 2010b, p.2). These theorists would argue that human behaviour is accorded meaningfulness, and the differences displayed through behaviour are a reflection of the different problems and solutions to these problems which have been devised over time by each individual subculture (Young 2010b, p.2). In short deviant subcultures are formed by individuals concerned with problem solving their existing lives. Theorists from this school of thought understand crime as “a product of the imbalance between societies culturally ascribed goals and it’s opportunity to achieve them” (Bilton et al 2002, p.386). Miller (1970 cited in Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.563) contends that deviant sub-cultures

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are created among the under-privileged classes who are without the necessary life chances required to achieve the idealised conventional goals of western society. Criminals who retreat into the safety of sub-cultures having been isolated by conventional society receive much needed support and acceptance from other criminals. Here in Ireland we have family based gangs who each defend their particular territory and although these drug criminals may be shunned by conventional society, they are highly respected and accepted within the criminal world.

Crime and the Political Economy of Capitalism

To get a complete understanding of crime and deviance it is necessary not just to look at the interpretive meanings that social actors attach to crime. We must also look at the social structures that impact on an individual's behaviour. According to theorists within the radical criminology perspective, law-breaking, law-making and law enforcement are based on the premise that the law expands as the class gaps widen, and both crime and crime control divert attention from real economic problems (Bilton et al. 1997, p.392). Quinney (cited in Bilton et al. 1997, p.392) an American radicalist, argues that crime is a by-product of the political economy of capitalism in two main ways. First, economic redundancy is the result of the surplus population of labourers produced by the capitalist industry. Capitalists constantly move production operations to different locations in order to maximise their profits by obtaining the cheapest human labour leaving a trail of unemployed workers in their path. These unemployed workers may turn to crime to make ends meet. Second, Quinney (cited in Bilton et al 1997, p.392) argues that capitalism is responsible for the reproduction of crime because criminals, in particular those in organised crime, are simply aspiring to the capitalist values of conventional society. Accumulation of property, wealth and power at the expense of others has always been the underlying sentiment of the capitalist and according to Quinney

(cited in Bilton et al 1997, p.392); the underworld's criminals are capitalists in their own right. The only difference is the means by which they achieve their success, which has been defined by a capitalist society as illegal behaviour.

Spitzer (1980 cited in Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.452) argues that more attention should be placed on who does the labelling, as opposed to the labels themselves. Capitalism depends on respect for figures of power so those who resist authority are labelled deviant. Laws are not neutral and are present to protect the interest of the capitalist and not the working class. Spitzer (1980) and Young (2010a) clarify this argument by making the relevant point that we disapprove of using drugs of escape (such as marijuana and heroin) while advocating the use of drugs such as alcohol, caffeine and tobacco that are linked to productivity either because they enable relaxation before or after work or simply improve work performance (Spitzer 1980 cited in Macionis and Plummer 2005, p. 452; Young 2010a, pp.44-45). For example drugs such as alcohol and tobacco are universally accepted because they are viewed as relaxants that can help to unwind a worker after a stressful day at work. Ironically these socially accepted drugs have alarming fatality rates. Evidence suggests that there are over 200 alcohol related deaths per day (Young 2010a, p.44), and approximately 5 million smoking related deaths per year (Reuters 2007). Furthermore, drugs such as amphetamines and morphine are legally prescribed within society. Morphine is prescribed to relieve pain for terminally ill patients and amphetamines have been prescribed to civilians for slimming and counteracting depression (Young 2010a, pp.44-45).

The New Criminology perspective evolved from recognition of the lack of inter-connectedness between the crime and deviance theories put forward by the classical social theorists (Taylor et al. 1973, p.278). This new perspective is a normative theory, placing the focus on what ought to be as opposed to

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explaining and highlighting the causal determinants of existing crime (Taylor 1973, p.280). The New Criminology perspective is a critique of existing theories such as labelling and strain theories research input into understanding crime and deviance. The significant contribution of Symbolic Interactionism to understanding crime is acknowledged, but it is also criticised for its failure to expand its range of research to include the wider structural explanations of crime and crime control, in the process ignoring the material conflicts at the root of the criminal process (Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.452). The founders of this school of thought argue that research should be more concentrated on exploring the criminal actor and the judicial reactor, and how the problems for both had been defined (Taylor et al. 1973, p.279). They go on to argue that it is pointless in trying to eliminate deviant behaviour, as deviance is normal, due to human agency constantly asserting our human diversity in this ever changing world and furthermore, less criminalisation of behaviour by the powerful could ultimately reduce crime (Taylor et al. 1973, p.274).

Evaluating the two perspectives

In evaluating these two perspectives ability to explain the current prevalence of drug crime in Ireland it is necessary to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. Firstly, the micro-sociological lens used by theorists within the labelling perspective succeeds in humanising the deviant. Becker (1966, p.33) helps us to understand the consequences experienced by the offender who has been labelled a deviant and how society is very slow to give them another chance to redeem themselves thus treating the offender as a social outcast. The more the media highlight the issue of drug crime in Ireland, in particular the revenge killings associated with some of the more notorious crime families, the more intensive the reaction by society. Labelling theory also allows us to empathise with the harsh realities facing the criminal and enable us to understand how they might be forced into a life of crime. Goffman's theory on

stigmatisation (1963) helps us understand how society reacts in a negative way to the stigmatisation attached to the drug dealer and Matza and Syke's theory on neutralisation of stigmas (cited in Henry 2009, pp.59-62) help us to understand how the drug dealer negotiates their stigmatisation in order to continue their life of crime with a clear conscience. The sub-cultural perspective pinpoints other negative consequences of stigmatisation, in particular how offenders and especially juvenile offenders, will retreat to criminal subcultures if society fails to accept them and be willing to forgive them for past criminal behaviour. Interpretivist research in this field has contributed to worthwhile social policies being introduced to combat the negative consequences of stigmatisation, for example the Restorative Justice programmes which promotes positive re-integrative shaming. These programmes introduced by the Government since 1999 (National Commission on Restorative Justice 2009, pp.89-90), are proving successful in terms re-integration of juvenile offenders because their main aim is to fundamentally change how all the crime stakeholders think, feel and react to crime. These programmes and other such rehabilitation projects are successful because they are subjective in their approach. However the labelling perspective fails to address why universal deviancy such as murder is prohibited across most cultures and also neglects the process that leads to the act of drug dealing being defined as deviant. Furthermore empirical research within the labelling perspective fails to focus on the social structures that lead to people getting involved in crime in the first instance.

Therefore it is my contention that it is necessary to use a contemporary theoretical perspective on crime, which has a Marxist foundation, in order to properly address the political and economic implications of the crime situation in Ireland. The positive side to this perspective is that it not only focuses on the macro sociological aspects of crime but that it also focuses on the subjective interpretations of all the parties involved; the offender, the victim, the local

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community and the State, though not to the same intensive level as the labelling theorists. Quinney's explanation (cited in Bilton et al, 2002, pp.392-393) of how capitalist values indirectly attract some individuals to a life of crime helps us to understand the similarities between the drug dealers and 'other successful capitalists.' According to Sellin (1963, p.13) drug dealing is part of organised crime, which is synonymous with economic enterprise, with financial profit being the main goal. He further contends that the only difference between the legal and illegal enterprises is that the "illegal nature of the business has created problems that have to be solved in a way that a legal firm does not have to employ" (Sellin 1963, p.13). This would explain how those who operate outside the realm of conventional laws tend to create their own laws and deal with the deviancy according to how they see fit (such as their harsh sanction of execution for betrayal of the crime family or 'grassing' to the police).

Spitzer (1980 cited in Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.452) allows us to contemplate how our drug laws serve to intensify the drug crime in Ireland. If drug use was decriminalised in Ireland then it is possible to assume we would eliminate the need for drug dealers as these drugs could then legally be sold. The New Criminologists would have us focus on the relationship between the political economy and crime. The focus of our criminal justice system is firmly on equality before the law, but according to Taylor et al. (1973, p.281) while there may exist equality within our court systems it certainly does not exist in other sectors of industrialised society as evidenced lately by our tolerance of white collar crime within the banking institutions. The Government is capable of fast tracking new legislation to deal with drug crimes but our legislators do not appear to be in any rush to legislate for the inappropriate corporate behaviour of our bankers (Ross 2009). The New Criminology theorists would also draw our attention to how our Government maintains the interests of the capitalist by failing to address the social structural problems here in Ireland. For

example, the Government had allocated substantial funds for the Regeneration Programme proposed for Limerick City which was an excellent opportunity for the Government to tackle the inequality which has created the circumstances needed for criminal gangs to gain control in those estates in Limerick. However the fund for this project has now been reduced and the term of delivery has been extended, in favour of introducing the NAMA Project which was primarily established to bailout bankers and rich property developers, whose reckless behaviour has almost bankrupt our economy (Ross 2009, p.269, Allen 2009, p.144). According to Ross (2009, p.272), the launch of NAMA sent out a clear strong message to the Irish society; that “Irish bankers were too powerful to punish.”

Conclusions

Theorists within the labelling perspective give us a very thorough understanding of how the interpretations of both the drug dealers and the social audience (rest of society) impact on their behaviour, why drug dealers get stigmatised and how they manage to cope with such stigmatising. This approach helps us to understand the difficulties facing the offender in reclaiming their life after being labelled a criminal and how it may be necessary for him to continue a life of drug dealing in order to survive in a society that treats him as an outcast. This empathy allows us to inform social policies that promote re-integration of the criminal back into conventional society. On the other hand, radical criminology theories allow us to focus on the socio-economic inequalities of our society and how they are interpreted and acted upon by all people involved in the Criminal Justice System; the law enforcers, the law breakers and the law makers. This perspective, by focusing on the political economy of crime, highlights how the Government is currently prioritising the capitalists interest over the rest of society, and in particular the less well off, by funding the major financial rescue of the Bankers at the expense of worthy local community projects, social

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welfare payments and pay cuts throughout the public sector (Ross 2009, p.267), resulting in the working class paying for the mistakes of the rich.

I would argue that it is necessary to embrace both perspectives, incorporating research from both a micro- and macro - sociological approach, if we are to fully understand drug crime in Ireland and search for worthwhile solutions to combat it. As far as this author is concerned, incapacitation may be the only solution for the present drug criminals operating within Ireland at present, because unfortunately most of them have been well and truly socialised into a life of crime but I do believe that there is some hope for juvenile offenders and adults who engage in petty criminal activity. Its not too late to rescue them from a life of crime. We can start by desisting from labelling them as criminals, learn to disapprove of the offending behaviour whilst respecting the individual, have less custodial sanctions and more holistic approaches that foster forgiveness, acceptance and re-integration. De-criminalise recreational drugs and have strict regulations regarding the sale and distribution of them. This will eliminate the need for drug dealers. Finally using the revenue derived from the sale of these drugs, the focus should be placed on improving the life chances of young people from the lower social classes. By providing better access to education and job opportunities, the need for young people from underprivileged backgrounds to sustain their income with criminal activities will be greatly diminished. By adopting this approach to tackling crime, Ireland not only reduces it crime rate but it becomes a far more caring society in the process.

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