Identity, Situational Elements, and Responses to Drug Debt

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines illicit drug sellers’ explanations of how their identities and attendant responses to drug debts are influenced by the situational elements of accounts, relationships with customers, and their business concerns. Methods: The study draws from data gathered from in-depth interviews with 33 active drug dealers operating in St. Louis, Missouri. Informants were recruited using a snowball sampling design. Data were analyzed using qualitative methods. Results: Drug sellers explain their self-views as “drug sellers” and ideal responses to debts as associated with the amounts and types of drugs they sell and their relationships with suppliers and customers as a whole. They suggest that deviations from these identities and responses are due to accounts (in the case of sellers that use violence), relationships with specific customers, and business concerns. Conclusions: The results add complexity to understanding of the connection between drug market structure, sellers’ identities, and their conflict management. Results also suggest the connection between culture and drug market violence is more nuanced than previously suggested. This study also

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adds to criminological understanding of how accounts can deescalate conflict by altering identities of offending parties and grievants.

Keywords
drug market conflict, drug debts, friendship, accounts, drug dealing

Criminologists have long noted that many illicit drug sellers use violence when settling disputes (e.g., Fagan and Chin 1990; Goldstein 1985; Goldstein, Brownstein, and Ryan 1992). It is argued that one reason underlying this violence is that victimized or aggrieved drug sellers perceive a lack of access to formal mediation mechanisms and are therefore compelled to take matters into their own hands when resolving conflict (Jacobs 1999; Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright 2000; Jacques and Wright 2011; Reuter 2009; Wright and Decker 1997). Extant research has also posited that drug sellers use violent “self-help” (Black 1983) for two other reasons. First, they use it as a means to project social identities as “hard” persons who cannot be victimized or “exploited with impunity” (Jacobs 2004:296). They also do so in order to facilitate their own self-identification as these types of persons (Pearson and Hobbs 2001; Reuter 2009; Topalli, Wright, and Fornango 2002; see also, Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995).

A smaller body of research has argued that some illicit drug sellers are reluctant to use violence and instead employ other forms of conflict management for one or more reasons. Some sellers, particularly those with middle-class backgrounds, fear drawing the attention of the police to their illicit trade (e.g., Adler 1993; Jacques and Wright 2008, 2011; Taylor 2007). Drug sellers may also reject violence to avoid projecting a violent reputation that may lead to social censure from customers and others who abhor violence. Finally, sellers may be unaccustomed to violence in general and see it as inconsistent with their self-identities (e.g., Jacques and Wright 2015; Mohamed and Fritzsvold 2010). Rather than resorting to violence, these sellers use strategies such as avoidance, fraud, negotiation, tolerance, and theft when responding to conflict (e.g., Belackova and Vaccaro 2013; Hoffer 2006; Jacques 2010; Taylor and Potter 2013).

These bodies of literature suggest that drug sellers’ identities may play a role in how they manage conflict. Some drug sellers wish to project identities as violent persons, whereas others want to avoid being seen in this light. Similarly, some drug sellers self-identify as persons for whom violence is an acceptable recourse to conflict, whereas others do not. Identity,
however, is a fluid construct subject to situational influences (see, e.g., Goffman 1959; Lofland 1969). For instance, Anderson (1999) has argued that African American residents of disadvantaged, urban communities are prone to alter their identities, or “code-switch,” when subjected to the situational influence of moving between private and public contexts. One possible situational element that may influence illicit drug sellers’ identities, and thus how they respond to conflict, is customers’ verbal accounts—or the excuses and justifications they give for their misdeeds. In short, accounts can alter the course of a conflict by changing how grievants identify themselves or the person(s) providing the account(s) (Scott and Lyman 1968). This, in turn, can then shape the way in which the grievant responds to the conflict (Fritsche 2002; Goffman 1959, 1971; Orbuch 1997).

Prior research on illicit drug sellers and users has highlighted that they commonly give and receive verbal accounts in various types of conflictual situations (see, e.g., Adler 1993; Hoffer 2006; Williams 1989). What has received little criminological attention is the relationship between these accounts, drug sellers’ identities, and their reactions to conflict. Thus, the initial focus of the present study was to investigate drug sellers’ explanations of whether and how receiving verbal accounts from customers changed their self-views and, in turn, how they treated these customers. In the course of exploring this research question through conversations with active, illicit drug sellers, however, it emerged that they also explained their identity shifts and attendant behavioral changes as tied to two other situational elements as well: their relationships with specific customers and their own business concerns.

Owing to this, the aim of this study is to examine drug sellers’ own descriptions of how their identities, and thus their actions, change given the presence of three situational elements: customers’ verbal accounts, sellers’ relationships with customers, and sellers’ business concerns. In doing so, it contextualizes the connection between the structure of illicit drug markets, the fluidity of drug sellers’ identities, and the ways in which drug sellers respond to conflict. The examination first has implications for criminological understanding of what forces may shape drug sellers’ identities. Tied to this, the study also offers insight into how the dynamic nature of offenders’ identities may influence their decisions when in conflict. More broadly, it also contributes to understanding of the etiology of violence in illicit drug markets by further specifying some of the concepts that may either encourage or discourage various types of conflict management among illicit drug sellers. Finally, it also adds to knowledge of the functions of verbal accounts among offenders.
Conceptual Background

Identity

Like all other persons, drug sellers’ actions are guided by their identities (see generally, Goffman 1967; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). Conceptually, identity may be separated into two distinct but interrelated constructs: personal identity and social identity (Lofland 1969). Personal identity refers to how individuals assess themselves or, in other words, the types of persons they like to think of themselves as being and the base on which they view themselves as distinct from others (Brewer 1991; Brokman, Copes, and Hochstetler 2011; Hogg and Abrams 1988; McCall and Simmons 1966; Shover 1996; Stets and Burke 2000:228). Personal identity guides behavior by providing individuals with goals and desires to pursue and the standards by which to do so (Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Hence, the ways in which drug sellers’ view themselves will likely play a role in how they respond to conflict with others.

Social identity, on the other hand, refers to individuals’ views of themselves as occupying specific social roles (Stryker 1968, 1980). Every individual takes on numerous social identities throughout the course of the situated interactions in their lives. For instance, an individual who sells illicit drugs may assume the identity of “drug seller” in one social context but take on that of friend, lover, or parent in another. Each of the social identities an individual takes on has a set of role expectations attached to it that are considered appropriate by others (Burke 1980, 1991; Simon 1992; Stets and Burke 2000; Stryker 1980). Moreover, if individuals behave as expected when in specific social identities or roles, they may confirm their status in the role and thus bolster their self-esteem (Hogg et al. 1995).

Oftentimes, the expectations attached to individuals’ social identities correspond with the standards set forth by their personal identities (Deaux 1992; Stets and Burke 2000). When there is conflict between these identities, however, individuals may disregard the expectations of their social identities and act in accordance with their personal views of self (Stets 1995). Likewise, when individuals are called upon to act in multiple social roles, they will fulfill the identity most favorable to them in terms of the treatment it garners from others and the self-esteem it provides (Hogg et al. 1995).

A growing body of research argues that individuals relay who they are—or their identities—to others not just through their behavior but also through the stories they tell about their actions and experiences (see, e.g., Bruner 1987; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Ezzy 1998; Gergen and Gergen 1988;
McAdams 1990; Presser 2008). Put another way, the way someone talks about his or her actions can be indicative of his or her personal and social identity. Moreover, sociologists focusing on interpersonal interactions have long noted that when individuals are interacting with others, it is common for them to take steps to manage the impression they make on these others (see Goffman 1959, 1967, 1969, 1971; Scott and Lyman 1968). When telling stories about their past experiences, these steps can include selecting and interpreting the details of these past experiences, such that the individuals present an idealized version of themselves—or how they wish to view themselves or to be viewed by others (Bluck and Levine 1998; DeGloma 2014; McAdams 1993, 2001; Zerubavel 2003).

This conceptualization of identity has important implications for the study of decision-making among drug sellers because, as previously noted, the role of “drug seller” is one of the many identities that they may assume throughout the course of their lives (Belackova and Vaccaro 2013). At times, illicit drug sellers may act as they think drug sellers “should” and attempt to conform to the expectations they associate with this role. If they view “drug sellers” as persons who should respond to conflict in a certain way (i.e., with violence, avoidance, or toleration), they will likely do the same. At other times, drug sellers may forgo acting in this way in favor of their personal identities or whatever other social identities are more “salient” to them at the time (see Hogg et al. 1995 on “salience” in social identity theory). Put differently, if sellers view one type of conflict management as unacceptable from the perspective of their personal identities or the social roles they have assumed aside from “drug seller,” they may resort to other forms.

The manner in which individuals respond to interpersonal conflict is also dependent on how they socially identify those with whom they have problems (Goffman 1959, 1971; Lofland 1969). Put differently, the way in which individuals treat persons they have problems with may vary according to whether they see them as friends, enemies, lovers, business partners, or as other social roles. Because of this, persons may attempt to manage or manipulate how aggrieved parties view them as a means to garner favorable treatment from these parties (Goffman 1963; Hewitt and Stokes 1975; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Lofland 1969; Schlenker 1980). Hence, the individuals with whom drug sellers are in conflict may do likewise in order to prevent the sellers from responding in ways the individuals see as unfavorable.

The first way that drug customers can alter how aggrieved drug sellers view them is by changing their own behavior (see generally, Goffman 1967).
A second way is through the stories they tell about their lives (see generally, Frank 2010; McAdams 1993; Presser 2008). A related way that drug customers can mold their social identities and thereby avoid punishment from aggrieved drug sellers is by providing them with verbal accounts for their untoward actions (see generally, Goffman 1971; Scott and Lyman 1968).

**Accounts**

Accounts are retrospective statements used by individuals who have violated norms to explain their dissonant or unacceptable actions (Scott and Lyman 1968:46). Excuses and justifications are two common types of accounts (Schonbach 1990; Scott and Lyman 1968). The receipt of an account can alter individuals’ responses to conflict by affecting how they view themselves and offensive parties (Copes, Brookman, and Brown 2013; Fritsche 2002). Accounts perform these functions in several ways: They may suggest that the source of the conflict is not as much of the offending party’s fault as it appears to be, that the offensive behavior is atypical for the offending party, that it is an offense that anyone could commit, or that the offending party regrets it (Felson 1982; Schlenker, Pontari, and Christopher 2001; Scott and Lyman 1968; see also, Sykes and Matza 1957). The goal of this impression management strategy is to convince grievants to view the offending party’s actions as an anomaly or as unreflective of their social identity and therefore insufficient to redefine the offending party or themselves within current circumstances (Pogrebin, Poole, and Martinez 1992). This, in turn, can then prevent grievants from treating the offending party differently because they do not see themselves in roles that would punish or otherwise respond to the offense, and they do not see the individual as the type of person deserving it.

Before an account can affect how a grievant assesses the social identities of others, he or she must first accept or “honor” it (Scott and Lyman 1968). For this to occur, the account must first meet the “background expectancies” of the social group in which it is given or be recognized by them as an appropriate way to define a disruptive action (Goffman 1971; Scott and Lyman 1968). The content of the account must also adequately address the severity of the violation to be honored (Scott and Lyman 1968). Finally, grievants are more likely to honor accounts if offensive parties demonstrate deference when offering them (Blumstein et al. 1974; Goffman 1967, 1971; Maruna and Copes 2005; Scott and Lyman 1968).

Because accounts can alter the identities of offensive parties and grievants and thereby shape the conflict among them, they may also perform
similar functions among drug sellers. As already stated, although prior research has noted that drug sellers and users give and receive accounts for various types of conflict—particularly that surrounding unpaid drug debts—this research has not examined drug sellers’ explanations of whether and how accounts influence their self-views and identifications of customers. An examination thereof is important because it may provide insight into some of the forces that might shape decision-making among drug sellers. The present study provides such an examination but, as previously mentioned, in talking about accounts and conflict management with active illicit drug sellers, it uncovered that these sellers’ also explain their actions and how they see themselves as being influenced by a second situational element: their relationships with customers.

**Relationships**

The emergent theme of drug sellers’ relationships with customers affecting how they see themselves and, ultimately, how they manage conflict with these customers has received some previous criminological attention (e.g., Adler 1993; Jacobs 1999; Moeller and Sandberg 2015, 2017). For instance, Jacques and Wright (2010) have argued that as the social distance between sellers and customers increases, sellers are more likely to defraud customers and behave in other predatory ways. Contrarily, as the distance decreases, sellers are more likely to provide customers with preferential treatment such as deals on purchases and drugs on consignment (Jacques, Allen, and Wright 2014; Jacques and Wright 2015). Other research has noted that sellers base such decisions on assumptions that individuals closer to them are more trustworthy than those who are not (Decker and Chapman 2008; Reuter and Haaga 1989).

Prior research has also argued that just as sellers are more likely to give friends, family members, and regular customers preferential treatment in terms of discounts and the like on drugs, so too they are more likely to use nonviolent forms of conflict management in response to problems with them (e.g., Moeller and Sandberg 2017; Sandberg and Pederson 2009; Taylor and Potter 2013; Waldorf and Murphy 1995). Conversely, drug sellers may be more likely to use violence or the threat thereof when responding to conflict with more socially distant parties (Jacques 2010; Jacques and Wright 2008). Here, I explore similar results that emerged inductively from my discussions with active drug sellers. I also build on this previous research by investigating how drug sellers’ relationships with customers are associated with changes in their identities and consequent
conflict management strategies. In addition, I examine a third situational element the sellers suggested was important when deciding how to best resolve conflict with their customers: their need to make profit or business concerns.

**Business Concerns**

The sale of illicit drugs, while illegal, resembles legal businesses in that those undertaking it must profit, or at the very least avoid taking financial losses, if they are to keep their enterprises afloat. Like the relationships between drug sellers and customers, extant research has also touched on how this concern affects the behavior of illicit drug sellers (see, e.g., Bourgois 1995; Goldstein 1985; Jacobs 1999; Williams 1989). For instance, Moeller and Sandberg (2015, 2017) argue that sometimes the desire for profit can influence sellers’ decisions at times when the inventory they have on hand exceeds customer demand. In such situations, drug sellers may manage conflict in ways they otherwise would not by consigning more product to customers with outstanding debts or by forgiving or reducing their debts. Similarly, the potential of losing regular customers may also create situations in which sellers manage conflict differently out of desires to maintain a profitable customer bases (e.g., Chalmers and Bradford 2013; Denton and O’Malley 1999; Jacobs 1999; Jacques and Wright 2015). Finally, drug sellers may choose nonviolent conflict management strategies in lieu of violence out of fear that the latter will scare away potential customers (Jacques and Wright 2015) or that it will lead to increased police attention and a subsequent loss of business due to police confiscation of drug supplies, incarceration, or the withdrawal of drug suppliers (e.g., Adler 1993; Decker and Chapman 2008; Dunlap, Johnson, and Maher 1997; Taylor and Potter 2013). Again, although prior work has explored the importance of business concerns and how these concerns influence drug sellers’ decisions, this work has not examined sellers’ explanations of how the need for profit can alter how they view themselves and, in turn, how they treat their customers. The present study addresses this lacuna.

I begin by detailing the data and methods informing the analysis. I then discuss the results of this analysis, focusing first on how this group of active, illicit drug sellers’ ideal ways of viewing themselves and responding to debtors are related to the structure of their respective markets. Next, I turn to exploring the drug sellers’ explanations of how their ideal identities and behaviors are influenced by customers’ accounts, their relationships with customers, and their own business concerns. I conclude by discussing the
implications of these results for criminological understanding of the relationship between drug market structure and drug market conflict, the connection between culture and the shape of this conflict, and existing criminological theories regarding offender decision-making.

**Data and Methods**

This investigation is informed by data gathered through interviews with 33 individuals who were actively selling illicit drugs in the St. Louis, Missouri, greater metropolitan area. To meet the study criterion, and thus be considered an “active” seller, the informants had to have been selling illicit drugs during the year prior to their interviews. All but two of them were currently selling at the time of data collection. I located and recruited these informants between winter 2012 and late fall of that year using a snowball sampling design (Wright et al. 1992). I initiated the sample by first asking eight individuals who were actively selling soft drugs that I knew through working and attending college classes to participate in the study. I then accrued additional participants by asking these initial informants and three contacts who knew illicit drug sellers to refer other individuals meeting the study criterion. When approaching all potential informants, I first advised them of the numerous safeguards intended to protect their identities and prevent potential harm to their social and legal standing. These included using pseudonyms in place of their real names, using encrypted external hard drives to store the audio files and transcriptions of their interviews, and only gathering information about their past criminal behavior.

Recruiting informants from one’s own social networks is common in drug research (see, e.g., Adler 1993; Curcione 1997; Jacques 2010; Mohamed and Fritzvold 2010) and in the research of active offenders more broadly (see, e.g., Becker 1963; Goffman 2014; Polsky 1969). One of the key reasons for this is that members of “hidden populations” (Wiebel 1990) such as these are often reluctant to divulge information about their deviant or illegal activities to unknown or untrusted others due to potential legal and/or social repercussions (Heckathorn 1997). When researchers have established a degree of trust with potential informants over the course of preexisting relationship, this can help assuage the potential informants’ fears of these repercussions and can thus increase the likelihood of their participation in research studies (Lambert and Wiebel 1990). In addition, using a researcher as a starting point for qualitative investigations is justifiable on the grounds that these types of research designs seek to understand “a culture or group from the perspective of its members” (Feldman, Agar,
and Beschner 1979:4). Gaining this “insider’s view” (Spradley 1979:13) requires that researchers immerse themselves in the worlds of their subjects (Spradley 1980)—a task that is also facilitated by prior familiarity with subjects.

The drug sellers interviewed can be conceptually grouped into a taxonomy consisting of four broad “types” of illicit drug sellers according to the kinds of drugs they sold (i.e., “hard” drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and crystal methamphetamine [meth]; “soft” drugs such as DMT, ecstasy or molly [MDMA], hallucinogenic mushrooms, LSD, marijuana, and sassafras [MDA]; various pharmaceuticals intended to treat anxiety or attention disorders; and whether they were suppliers or retail-level dealers). Suppliers are defined as illicit drug sellers who purchase wholesale units of drugs and then make commercial profit by redistributing them to other suppliers and retail-level dealers (see Pearson and Hobbs 2001 on “mid-level” dealers). Retail-level dealers are defined as illicit drug sellers who purchase wholesale units of drugs and make commercial profit by redistributing them to end users (Johnson, Dunlap, and Tourigny 2000). Eight of the informants were suppliers of hard drugs, 2 sold hard drugs at the retail level, 10 supplied soft drugs, and the remaining 13 sold soft drugs to end users. All of the informants sold in closed markets or markets where sellers only conduct trade with customers they know and trust or who are vouched for by other trusted friends and associates (May and Hough 2001:139).

The ages of the informants ranged from 19 to 41 with a mean age of 28.6 years. Twenty-nine of them were male. One was Chinese American, 2 were White/Latino, 3 were African American, and the remaining 27 were White. Twenty-nine were legally employed at the time of the interviews. Sixteen had either graduated from college or were working toward obtaining undergraduate degrees. Of those who had not pursued higher education, six were awarded high school diplomas, four earned general educational development degrees, and three had dropped out of high school. Regarding involvement with the criminal justice system, only six of the informants had ever been incarcerated on drug-related charges. Fifteen had been convicted of drug possession or sales but had served no time, and three had been incarcerated on nondrug-related charges. The remaining 10 informants had never been arrested for drugs or any other charges. These characteristics were not exclusively patterned among any of the four types of drug sellers (i.e., suppliers of hard drugs, dealers of soft drugs, etc.). That is, the ages, race/ethnicities, employment statuses, educational attainments, and experiences with the criminal justice system of the informants were not featured among some of the types of sellers and not the others.
Twenty-nine of the informants came from working-class, lower-middle-class, or middle-class backgrounds. That is, they were raised in working-class neighborhoods in the city (2), lower-middle-class or middle-class suburban communities (25), or working-class rural areas (2), and one or both of their parents were employed and had attained high school or college educations. Two hard-drug suppliers and the two hard-drug retail-level dealers grew up in disadvantaged, urban communities. These informants had been raised by single parents who had attained high school diplomas or, in the case of one of them, by two criminally involved parents who had dropped out of high school. According to their own admissions and their demographic indicators, these four informants came from backgrounds associated with “street culture” (see Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Wright and Decker 1994). The other informants claimed to be from “middle-class” backgrounds or, in other words, they hailed from more conventionally oriented cultures (see Baumgartner 1988; Jacques and Wright 2015).

A potential detriment to recruiting informants from among a researcher’s preexisting social connections is that it can lead to sampling bias. More specifically, it can result in a sample with homogenous characteristics bearing similarity to those of the researcher. This was certainly the case with the initial informants in the present sample, as they all featured similar characteristics to myself. But as the sample branched out from these initial informants through referrals, I began to recruit informants from several other disparate social networks. This expanded the characteristics of the sample afield from my own in terms of the informants’ educational backgrounds, places of residence, social classes, and experiences with the criminal justice system. The inclusion of disparate social networks also increased the prospect that the sample was not comprised of atypical offenders or those with similar viewpoints (Heckathorn 1997; see also Jacobs and Miller 1998; Wright and Decker 1994). Nonetheless, the purposive nature of the sampling strategy and the unknown parameters of the population of illicit drug sellers at large preclude any conclusive assertions about the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings (see Glassner and Carpenter 1985; Watters and Biernacki 1989).

Interviews ranged in length from 33 to 104 minutes, with an average length of 55.5 minutes. Each was digitally recorded with the respective informant’s permission. Before conducting the interviews, I discussed the informed consent protocol with each informant at length and answered any questions they had. Interviews were conducted in various locations deemed safe by both parties, such as a university office, a university conference room, public parks, and various taverns and restaurants. The individual
interviews were guided by a semistructured interview protocol that allowed for free-flowing conversation and the introduction of new concepts by the informants. It also permitted them to expand on tangential narratives and examples. Owing to this, no interview followed the same path and not all questions were posed in the same order or at all to each informant. Nonetheless, each was asked questions pertaining to their identities, how they responded to debtors, and whether the accounts they sometimes received from debtors influenced these responses.

The two previously mentioned foci—the relationship between sellers’ identities and their responses to conflict and how customers’ accounts affected this relationship—guided the study during data collection. Data on the former were collected with questions such as “How do you feel about being a drug dealer?” “Why are you selling drugs?” “What do you do if someone doesn’t pay you back for a front [drugs sold on commission]?” “What kind of other problems do you have with customers?” and “How do you handle such problems?” Data on the latter were gathered with questions such as “What kinds of things do customers say to you [when they don’t pay back a front]?” “Does that change how you view them?” and “Has this ever changed your reaction?” But, as already noted, during analysis, it became evident that the sellers also considered two other situational elements as having some degree of influence over their identities and responses to conflict: their relationships with customers and their own business concerns. Data on these emergent themes arose from the informants’ responses to questions such as those previously listed. For example, when informants were asked why they responded in different ways to similar types of conflict with different customers, they would offer responses such as “Because he’s my cousin” or “Because I needed to pay back my supplier.”

In analyzing the informants’ interview transcripts, I considered them as two intertwined types of data (see Miller and Glassner 1997). First, I examined the stories provided by the sellers as representative of their actual behaviors and experiences (Brookman et al. 2011). I also analyzed their stories as data in and of themselves (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Frank 2010; Maruna 2001; Presser 2008). This latter type of analysis regards informant’s stories as important because, as previously mentioned, they are indicative of the way informants’ view themselves, or their personal identities, and the way they wish to be seen by others, or their social identities (Miller and Glassner 1997:137; see also, Goffman 1959, 1967; McAdams 1993, 2001; Presser 2008).

Throughout analysis, NVivo was used as a tool to organize and visually represent the connections between the domains and subdomains. Analysis
began with a comparison of the sellers’ responses and statements within their respective interviews and then across the full set of interviews. Similar responses and statements were grouped into broad, general categories (e.g., types of accounts given by debtors, types of seller responses, types of relationships between sellers and customers). The interview excerpts comprising these categories were then classified into smaller, more narrowly defined categories on the basis of their similarities or dissimilarities (e.g., getting aggressive, toleration, giving more time; see Spradley 1979, 1980). Following this, patterns among these categories and subcategories were then assessed. Once a theme was deemed to be common by its presence in three or more interviews, the data were thoroughly reviewed to see how the theme served as a narrative thread across the others.

The search for and analysis of negative or deviant cases was an integral part of constructing the themes presented herein (see Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984; Silverman 1993). As an example of this, consider the negative case analysis of the question: “How do accounts affect this group of drug sellers’ responses to conflict?” After analyzing several initial interviews, I developed the hypothesis: “Accounts do not affect these drug sellers’ responses to debt.” Following the formation of this hypothesis, I began to analyze the data for the presence of deviant cases—or drug sellers whose responses were affected by accounts—that countered or did not support this hypothesis. Analysis of the entirety of the data set revealed that several of the sellers did in fact claim that their responses were affected when customers gave accounts for failing to pay their debts. Due to this, I discarded the initial hypothesis and began analyzing the data for similarities and dissimilarities between these cases and the sellers who were not affected by accounts across a range of dimensions (e.g., types of drugs sold, amounts of drugs sold, types of customers, use/lack of violence, background characteristics). As the only dimension distinct between these groups was their view of violence, I refined the initial hypothesis into two hypotheses: (1) Drug sellers who see violence as an acceptable response to drug debts alter their responses when receiving accounts from drug debtors; (2) Drug sellers who use other forms of conflict management do not (see Cressey 1953 for an excellent example of this process).

I then performed a second analysis of the interview data to investigate whether any of the sellers who saw violence as acceptable were not affected by customers’ accounts and, conversely, whether those who used other forms of conflict management were affected by customers’ accounts. This
investigation did not uncover any exceptions to the hypotheses. These hypotheses inform the themes presented in the results.

The data were similarly analyzed for negative cases regarding the two emergent themes: How drug sellers’ relationships with customers and their business concerns affect their responses to drug debts. As these themes were not explicit study concerns during data collection, not all subjects were asked about them. Owing to this, the themes presented are based only on comments offered spontaneously by the participants. To assess the validity of these themes, I performed a negative case analysis echoing that described above. More specifically, I searched for instances in each of the interviews in which a drug seller had not changed his or her response to drug debts due to his or her relationship with a customer or out of business concerns. This investigation did not uncover any such instances. This, however, may be a methodological artifact arising from the lack of questioning on these topics. Readers should therefore consider the possibility that these themes may only apply to the sellers who spontaneously offered them and not to the remainder of the sample.

Consideration of deviant cases took place solely during analysis and not during the recruitment stage of the study for several reasons. First, as the broader study informing this article was an investigation of various aspects surrounding the sale of illicit drugs, sampling was driven by the “dependent variable”: selling illicit drugs. Because the criterion of actively selling drugs alone was difficult to satisfy when locating and recruiting participants, no other criteria guided the sampling process. Beyond this, because the individuals participating in this study were actively selling drugs, they seldom disclosed much of the details of their illicit enterprises to anyone, even their close friends and acquaintances, for fear that the leak of this information could increase the odds of arrest, victimization, or damage to their reputations. This often precluded the sellers whom referred additional study participants from being able to provide information about these participants other than that they were drug sellers. Hence, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to locate deviant cases (i.e., sellers’ whose behavior was affected by accounts) until actually gaining informed consent and conducting an interview with an individual—and thus including one in the sample.

Given that the characteristics of this sample differ from those of the types of drug sellers who have received the lion’s share of criminological attention (see, e.g., Bourgois 1995; Jacobs 1999; Johnson and Natarajan 1995; Mieczkowski 1990; Williams 1989), questions may be raised as to whether these characteristics affect the internal validity of the results. Put differently, why is the sample appropriate for the research questions under study?
The answer is that although not all of these drug sellers hail from disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods, traffic in heroin and cocaine, or regularly use violence, they do actively sell illicit drugs. And in the course of selling illicit drugs, they encounter situations wherein they receive accounts from customers, have relationships with them, and have to maintain their illicit businesses. Therefore, they can offer insights into the various ways these situational elements have affected their experiences in selling illicit drugs, much like how numerous other samples of drug sellers also unlike those just described have also added to criminological understanding of various aspects of illicit drug selling through analysis of their experiences (see, e.g., Adler 1993; Curcione 1997; Jacques and Wright 2015; Mohamed and Fritzvold 2010; Taylor and Potter 2013; Waldorf and Murphy 1995).

Results

Through their stories about selling drugs and managing unpaid drug debts, the sellers interviewed presented idealized versions of how they saw themselves and how they wanted others to view them (see generally, Goffman 1959, 1967, 1971; McAdams 1993, 2001; Miller and Glassner 1997; Presser 2008). They did so by explaining how they would respond to debt in hypothetical scenarios and how they had generally done so over the course of their selling careers. The sellers’ idealized versions of their identities acted as templates or baselines for their behavior but, as the sellers explained, they would often stray from these idealized versions of self in specific instances due to the receipt of accounts from debtors, their relationships with specific debtors, and the need to maintain their illicit businesses.

Drug Sellers’ Identities and Ideal Responses to Unpaid Debt

It was common practice for all the sellers to provide or receive drugs on credit (e.g., Adler 1993:106; Hoffer 2006:76; Jacobs 1999:59). Despite their best efforts to only “front” or extend credit to trustworthy debtors, the sellers inevitably did so with some that “flaked” (John) or failed to repay their debts (e.g., Goldstein 1985; Jacobs 1999). A subset of sellers—seven of the eight suppliers of hard drugs—responded to “flaking” debtors with violence. Jarod, a White, 30-year-old, meth cook and supplier, explained his stance on unpaid debts:

If you steal from me . . . I’m getting my money’s worth out of you, at least . . . . Now if you . . . stole twenty dollars’ . . . from me . . . then I’m usually
gonna try to hurt you... if somebody robs me for five grand not only do I need that five grand but now you’ve just caused me a lot of headache and hassle and you cost me money so now I need more than my five grand back, now it’s not a matter of my cash anymore, now it’s a matter of principle... there’s... a saying, “hands laid, debts paid.”

When asked how he reacted when debtors “flaked,” Burt responded similarly. “There’s been cats walking down the street butt-ass naked, you know? You ain’t got the money?” I’m taking your shoes, take whatever, strip down.”

The remainder of the sellers responded by simply reminding debtors of their outstanding debts or by discontinuing sales to them (see Black 1998 on “toleration” and “avoidance”). “If [debtors] are taking a little long,” John stated, “you might confront them and say, ‘What’s the fucking deal?’... just start calling them... until you get... [your] money.” Mitch echoed this, “I would be like ‘Look, I need my money!’... until they paid me.” Perry, a White, 35-year-old, marijuana supplier, described discontinuing sales:

They hafta come through, you know what I mean? You can’t front somebody something and they just never repay you. Some kind of assholes’ll do that sometimes. They’ll just be like “Oh, I ain’t got it.” “What do you mean, you ain’t got it? Yes you do. You owe me money for this.” What do you do? I don’t know... I guess you just... think the guy’s a cock, man, like, “You’re a fucking cock, you’re done here, don’t bother me anymore.” I guess it’s like burning a bridge.

Bugs followed suit, albeit more succinctly, “The people that [don’t] pay me, I basically cut them off.”

From an outside perspective, the threat of being “cut off” from drug supplies may seem to carry little consequence. But from the perspective of these sellers and their customers, losing one’s “plug” (Bugs), or supplier, was a serious matter. This could not only result in a seller or user being unable to find drugs for personal consumption but could also drastically reduce their ability to make money as well. And this, in turn, could be deleterious for those individuals relying on the profits of drug sales to eat, pay bills, or otherwise survive. As John, a White, 34-year-old, psychedelic mushroom grower and supplier, put it:

A lot of people survive on this shit [selling drugs], they can’t without it, so... you cut them off, well man, you’re taking food off their fucking
... Take a fucking couple of hundred bucks out of some poor mother-fucker’s pocket, well he’s going to straighten up . . . . You don’t have to be physically violent with anybody, you don’t even have to be rude, you don’t even have to raise your voice, you fucking take their money away.

For these reasons, these sellers thought that “cutting people off” was not only an appropriate response to unpaid debt but was also a serious enough threat to deter others from “flaking” on them in the future.

When asked about how they responded to unpaid drug debts, the sellers described their responses with generalized information from various actual events and hypothetical scenarios (see McAdams 2001:108 on “general event clusters”). That is, they did not provide distinct examples of instances wherein they responded to specific customers who owed them money for “fronted” drugs. They instead gave examples of how they “generally” responded or “would” respond in such instances. Here, following the extant research previously discussed (see, e.g., Bluck and Levine 1998; Bruner 1987; Goffman 1959; McAdams 1993, 2001), the sellers’ stories about how they typically responded to debt are treated as indicators of the personal and social identities they wish to project to others—or as idealized versions of how they want others to view them and their past behavior.

The sellers’ stories are also used here as indicators of their identities for two other reasons. First, the sellers who saw violence as acceptable only offered vague statements about their identities when directly questioned about why they used violence or whether they saw themselves as violent drug sellers. They responded to these questions with statements such as “you gotta do what you gotta do” (Burt) or by emphasizing that they could not let debtors “fucking get over” (V) on them. In the case of these sellers then, their stories about themselves served as the best proxy for how they wished to be viewed. In the case of the other sellers, the identities suggested by their stories were further supported by some of their responses to similar questions. Most of these responses consisted of vague statements such as “That’s just how I roll, man” (Perry), but a few were slightly more explicit. For instance, Natalie explained her aversion to violence by stating, “We’re not really a violent crew . . . . I’m just not that kind of person.” And Jacob said, “I’m not like a dick. I don’t know, I don’t threaten people. It’s just like, ‘Hey.’ You, know?”

The sellers’ ideal responses to debt were patterned according to the structure of the sellers’ respective markets—meaning the amounts and types of drugs they sold and the types of suppliers and customers with whom they did business. The sellers whose ideal responses to debt involved violence were all suppliers of hard drugs, whereas all but one of those who
responded with verbal harassment or avoidance were suppliers of soft drugs or sold hard or soft drugs at the retail level. Associated with this, the seven who reported using violence considered their suppliers and customers as a whole to be “acquaintances” (Burt). “To tell you the truth,” Burt explained, “you don’t have real friends. Everybody, it’s . . . acquaintances.” This was contrasted against the other sellers—including the one supplier of hard drugs, Jacob, who did not report using violence—who stressed that all of their suppliers and customers were friends. “I only deal with friends,” Bugs said. Dean spoke similarly, “Pretty much . . . I just deal with my friends.” Natalie echoed this, “I just have my real close friends and relatives and friends of the close friends are all that I really mess with.”

To be sure, the sellers who used violence also did business with friends. Unlike the other sellers, however, they defined “friend” much more narrowly. They only considered someone to be a friend if they knew him or her for some time. For example, Burt’s only “homies” or “ride or die dogs” were the people that he had “grown up” with or had “worked together” with for “years.” They reported occasionally selling to these friends, but on the whole, they sold primarily to acquaintances. The other sellers were much more cavalier when defining “friend.” They referred to all of their customers and suppliers this way regardless of the differences in their relationships with them. Like the sellers who used violence, they identified persons they had known for some time as friends. These were “close friends” (Wyatt). But they also identified two other types of persons as friends. “Not very good friends” were persons whom they did not “enjoy” (Gus) spending time with but to whom they would sell drugs. And “friends of friends” (Derrick) were persons deemed trustworthy enough to do business with on the basis of “vouches” (Mitch) from other friends.

In explaining the dynamics of handling debt owed them and that they owed others, the sellers noted that the types of relationships they had with suppliers—that is, whether they were acquaintances or friends—were associated with how these suppliers would respond to tardy repayment. The sellers who saw violence as acceptable did business with “scary” (Snap) acquaintances they viewed as likely to respond violently to unpaid debts. “Those boys don’t play,” Jarod said, “that’s their life. You live and die quickly.” V, a White, 28-year-old, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, marijuana, and meth supplier, provided an example of what could occur in such situations:

They sent me half a key [kilogram] of heroin and, to be honest with you, if I wasn’t on it [using heroin] I probably would’ve made a shitload of money. But that’s when it turned bad. I barely paid for it. Basically I fucking
up almost all of it... The [next] one they sent I fucked the whole thing up. My habit was really bad. They sent out two guys from New York to come down here, they came to my parents’ house and they held my parents hostage until I came up with the money...[by] rob[bing] somebody.

Because the seven suppliers of hard drugs who used violence all received their own drug supplies “on the front” (Dirty) from “scary” suppliers, they potentially faced violent repercussions if unable to repay their own debts. Fear of violent reprisals thus encouraged or supported these sellers’ identities as persons who viewed violence as an acceptable means to respond to unpaid drug debts. The other sellers explained that, because their “friends” supplied them with drugs, they did not need to worry about being attacked if they did not make good on their consignments. They understood that these “friends” would handle conflict in ways that are seen as acceptable for persons occupying social roles as friends—namely, without violence. They instead had to worry about “being cut off” (Gus) and its potential consequences.

Whether the sellers considered their customers on the whole to be acquaintances or friends was also associated with their ideas of what constituted appropriate responses to unpaid debt. The sellers who sold primarily to acquaintances could not count on these customers being “more inclined to give...[them]...money” (B) in the interests of “friendship” as was the case for sellers who sold primarily to friends. They instead thought that the acquaintances they sold to would only make repayment if they feared violent reprisal (Topalli et al. 2002). Speaking of what would happen if he did not adopt and project a violent social identity, Jarod explained, “If you rob from me [renege on a debt] and I don’t do anything about it, that’s gonna tell everybody else that they can come rob from me.” Here, he implies that by a tolerating debt or avoiding the debtor, he will not only fail to obtain repayment from said debtor but will also likely be “flaked” on by numerous others.

In sum, the sellers who used violent forms of conflict management when responding to unpaid debts were unlike those who resorted to nonviolent forms in that they did not consider themselves as “friends” when going about the course of conducting their illicit businesses. They instead saw themselves as “acquaintances.” Moreover, they saw themselves as acquaintances who faced the possible consequences of violent reprisals from their own suppliers and other customers being emboldened to “flake” on their respective debts. Thus, their ideal ways of responding to debt did not correspond with how they thought friends “should” behave toward
other friends, as those of the other sellers did, but instead corresponded with how they thought acquaintances should behave toward other acquaintances. They therefore viewed violence as an acceptable way to respond to reneging debtors.

It should be emphasized again that the identities and responses to debt presented by the sellers represented what they viewed as ideal—in other words, they liked to think of themselves as the types of persons who generally responded to debt in these ways. Throughout the course of the stories they told about selling drugs, however, the sellers explained that they often deviated from these identities and responses due to situational elements. More specifically, they sometimes did so in response to receiving accounts from debtors, because of their relationships with specific debtors and, finally, out of their own immediate business concerns.

**Situational Elements**

**Accounts.** All of the sellers interviewed told stories about times in which they had received accounts from debtors for unpaid obligations. But when asked whether these accounts altered how they would “typically” respond to these debts, only the seven who managed conflict with violence claimed that accounts motivated them to alter their responses. More specifically, on receiving an “acceptable” account from a debtor, these seven sellers were more likely to provide the debtor with additional time to repay rather than attacking him or her. Burt described this:

> The one... person... that doesn’t call, yeah I’m gonna go make it correct [assault him or her]. The other person that calls [and offers an account], you know, I might give em a little bit of sympathy, yeah, for a short period of time... [If] they make it correct... alright, it’s your last time, kick rocks, ain’t fucking with you no more.

These sellers’ decisions on what constituted an acceptable account was based wholly on the amount of deference demonstrated to them by the account giver and not on its content (i.e., whether it was “believable”). Burt noted the importance of respect when discussing how he decided to react to debtors’ accounts. “It’s at the moment, man,” he said. “It’s how I’m feeling right there at the moment... It’s all about how you handle it and how you’re gonna handle it... I mean, it comes down to a respect thing.” When shown this respect, these sellers adopted identities wherein giving debtors more time was seen as acceptable. When not shown it, they did not stray
from what they viewed as appropriate responses in such circumstances. Put differently, in being shown deference from debtors, the sellers were “altercast” (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963) into viewing themselves as the types of sellers or persons who would deviate from their ideal responses to debt.

When the sellers who used other, nonviolent forms of conflict management were asked about how they responded to debts after receiving accounts, they stressed that the accounts or any deference shown them did not influence their behavior. Perry, a White, 35-year-old, marijuana supplier, emphasized that he would still cease selling to customers owing him money no matter what their excuses were:

Well see, what happened was... my fucking gas got cut off and then my old lady got in a fight and she punched me in the face and I had to run out to the doctor I don’t have any money because I don’t have insurance and the doctor’s payment stitched me up... Motherfuckers do come up with some bullshit and I don’t even want to hear it. Bottom line is, dude, no I don’t want to hear this bullshit, I don’t give a fuck how your day went, like Goodfellas, you know, “Fuck you pay me.”... You get struck by lightning, fuck you pay me. You get hit by a car, fuck you pay me.

Jack, a White, 22-year-old marijuana supplier, responded more concisely, exclaiming, “I don’t really care what the excuse is.”

Although receiving accounts from customers seemingly had little effect on how these sellers saw themselves and how they responded to debts, close inspection of their comments—and those of the sellers that saw violence as acceptable—about accounts and debts revealed that they saw themselves as being influenced by two other situational elements. For instance, Perry followed his previous comment by stating that he was “still a softy sometimes” if the debtor was one of his “buddies who’s struggling.” This suggests that his relationships with specific debtors influenced his responses to debt. And directly after noting that he did not care “what the excuse is,” Jack said:

What I look at is, do I trust em to get me the money back?... No matter what the excuse is, are they good for it in the end? That’s all that really matters. It’s like man if you’ve gotta make up an excuse, if that’s what makes you feel comfortable to ask me for this favor, then go ahead. I’m not gonna judge you, um, but aside from that yeah, just money... get me the money back and I’m cool, that’s all that matters.
Here, Jack indicates that it is not the content of an account that causes him to divert from his ideal response to debt but rather his own interests in continuing to make profit. The following sections explore how the sellers explained their shifts in identity and behavior with these situational elements.

**Relationships.** Throughout the course of the interviews, many of the sellers (23) indicated that the nature of their relationships with specific customers altered how they saw themselves and their ideal responses to unpaid debt. More specifically, these sellers indicated that they treated “close friends” or “regular customers” who were late on repayment differently than they would other debtors. They gave these debtors more time to repay debts or forgave their debts entirely rather than assauling them or cutting them off from drug supply. When questioned further about whether he always violently retaliated against debtors, Burt said “It depends who you are, how long we been dealing with each other . . . There’s times . . . I’m gonna give you time.” He then provided an example of such a time. “I have one girl that work[ed] for me,” he said, “She owed me sixteen hundred dollars . . . A good friend of the family . . . later, she made it all correct . . . but I mean, we go back . . . Other cats, I don’t know.” V described a similar situation in which he did not respond with violence:

One of ‘em was a guy, we like started together and we were partners and I . . . kinda went my way, he kinda went his way, and we met back together . . . I was a lot farther ahead than he was and I kinda tried to help him out and get him back on his feet [gave him drugs on consignment] and it didn’t work . . . and it was a pretty good amount of money . . . and I just let him have it and . . . just chalked it up as a loss.

The sellers who typically responded with toleration or avoidance shared similar experiences. For example, Wyatt, a White, 32-year-old, marijuana dealer, described how he tolerated an ongoing debt from a close friend:

I front my friends all the time and . . . shoot, my buddy that I was telling you about earlier . . . he almost has a tab going with me all the time for at least a hundred and fifty dollars or more, like all the time . . . He’s owed me at least that much for the last three years of his life. He’s like, “I always have a bill going with you, don’t I?” and I’m like, “Yeah, you do” . . . I know I’m going to get the money from him and I know I’m going to get the money from my family and friends.
In these situations, the sellers’ friendships with debtors were more important to them than timely repayment or money owed. Natalie put it this way, “You’re friends first and then you’re business partners.”

The sellers’ comments suggest that they deviated from their ideal responses if their relationships with a given debtor made them assume the identity of “homie” or “close friend” over the identity of “drug dealer,” “acquaintance,” or “friend.” Homies or close friends, in the eyes of the sellers, do not attack their friends or cut them off from drugs. Doing so would be to fail to live up to how they felt close friends should act and could thereby cause them to experience negative emotions (see generally, Hogg et al. 1995; see also, Festinger 1962; Rebellon et al. 2014) that outweighed any consequences that may follow from their inability to collect, such as damage to their reputations or repercussions from their own creditors. Maintaining their roles as close friends was important to the sellers but, in addition to this, some of the sellers also indicated throughout their narratives that their needs to make profit—and thus their abilities to continue being “successful” drug dealers—also played into how they viewed themselves and how best to respond to debts.

**Business concerns.** In the words of a little over a third of the sellers (12), sometimes the need to “keep business going” (Jacob), or to continue making profit, motivated them to deviate from their ideal responses to debt. These sellers understood that violence or discontinuing sales would naturally remove a customer as a source of revenue. At times in which they were concerned with maintaining their customer base, the sellers would forego their ideal responses to debt and tolerate the loss, give debtors more time, or provide them the opportunity to make the money back. Jarod explained how he would sometimes continue doing business with debtors in the interest of continuing to make money:

> It’s a business, shit happens . . . if it wasn’t your fault, if you weren’t the cause of shit coming up missing or you losing my product . . . [and] you want to help me get my money back . . . chances are I’m gonna say, “Okay, come on, let’s get this money back.” Because I can make more money working with you than I can working without you. So why am I gonna cut off a hand that can provide for me, there’s no point in it.

Similarly, James discussed how he would sometimes temporarily stop selling to one of his customers instead of cutting him off altogether because the customer made him a significant amount of money on each transaction:
I fronted out this guy because I pay a thousand bucks for that quarter pound [of marijuana], he’d pay me twelve fifty [$1,250] but I didn’t have to do anything for it. . . . I’d have a hard time getting ahold of him [he was late on repayment]. . . . So I just wouldn’t pick up as much next time and wouldn’t include him on the next transaction,” he claimed, “I would just tell him I couldn’t find anything . . . basically just trying to get him to wanna . . . pay me on time.

The influence of the sellers’ business concerns on their responses to unpaid debt was also evident when they decided to cease “fronting” drugs to reneging customers but would continue selling to them. The sellers’ views of delinquent debtors as bad investments did not contradict their view of these customers as valuable sources of revenue, provided they came “with the money up front” (John). Speaking of how he would handle a debtor who was consistently late on repayment, Justin said: “Hey man, I’ll sell you a bag again in the future but I can’t front you anymore because you don’t pay me back quick enough and it’s inconvenient for . . . my bills.”

Here, the sellers’ concerns over their profit suggest that, even within their identities as “drug dealers,” there were subtle distinctions of identity. When simultaneously presented with delinquent debtors and a need to make money, the dealers chose between two distinctive dealer identities: One with behavioral expectations to maintain respect and avoid future victimization or to punish persons that violated their obligations and another with behavioral expectations to make the most money possible. Much of the time, the latter won out, indicating that the business aspect of a drug dealer identity was more salient (see Stryker and Serpe 1982) to them than an identity demanding respect and fear or an identity requiring that one not let others take advantage of him or her without redress (see also, Boduszek and Hyland 2011).

It bears repeating that although the sellers’ shifts from one form of nonviolent conflict management (i.e., avoidance) to another (i.e., toleration) may seem conceptually insignificant to outside observers, the sellers continually emphasized several reasons why these seemingly subtle shifts were significant to them and to their debtors. First, tolerating a loss or allowing late repayment permitted sellers to maintain their friendships with customers. Second, it also permitted sellers to potentially continue profiting from delinquent debtors. Third, doing so also allowed debtors to continue procuring drugs for personal consumption and to profit from the resale of them. Finally, shifting from avoidance to tolerance was significant to these sellers because word of doing so could potentially spread to other customers and
embolden these customers to not make good on their own debts. This, in turn, could thereby threaten sellers’ abilities to profit. Thus, while on its face moving from one form of nonviolence to another may seem a relatively insignificant shift to those on the outside of these informants’ worlds, to the informants and their co-offenders such shifts held numerous potential ramifications. They therefore did not take these decisions to do so lightly.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to explore drug sellers’ descriptions of how their identities and associated behavior changed when addressing drug debts due to customers’ verbal accounts, their relationships with these customers, and their own business concerns. The results from the deductive analysis illustrate that receiving accounts from reneging customers may cause drug sellers who see violence as an acceptable response to unpaid drug debts to see themselves in a different light and to thus respond to these debts in non-violent ways. This analysis also demonstrates that drug sellers who use other forms of conflict management may not alter their self-views and associated behavior due to the receipt of customers’ accounts. The inductive analysis suggests that illicit drug sellers may also alter their ideal responses to drug debts owing to their personal relationships with specific customers and their own immediate needs to continue making profit.

Prior research exploring drug market conflict may have oversimplified the connections between the characteristics of drug sellers’ respective markets, the identities of drug sellers, and their decisions on how to manage conflict. The amounts and types of drugs sold by sellers, the kinds of relationships they have with customers in general, and their self-identities may determine the ideal ways in which drug sellers like to think of how they will or should respond to debt-related conflict. In each conflictual situation, however, they must adopt a social identity appropriate to that situation. At times, these identities and their attendant behavioral expectations will reflect how drug sellers’ view themselves in their roles as “drug dealers.” At others, however, elements of the situation will impact this view and effectively “altercast” (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963) drug sellers into different identities with different behavioral expectations. This process echoes how Anderson’s (1999) subjects “code-switch” from “decent” to “street” when moving between public and private contexts. This was demonstrated by the informants presenting themselves as drug sellers who would respond to drug debts with violence or by ceasing sales but then countering these impressions by noting how accounts, friendship, and
need for profit could influence them to respond differently. This more varied array of responses complicates what was previously offered by researchers (see, e.g., Jacobs, Wright, and Topalli 2000; Reuter 2009, 2016; Topalli et al. 2002) as a straightforward link between the structural nature of drug markets and putative commonness of corrective or retaliatory violence.

This also has implications for understanding of how culture shapes drug market violence through its impact on identity. Previous research has suggested that some drug sellers are violent because of violent norms they adopted prior to their involvement in selling drugs (e.g., Coomber 2006; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Sommers and Baskin 1997). That is, the cultural worlds of drug offenders affect how they respond to conflict by providing them with a set of culturally approved behavioral repertoires (see generally, Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Jacques and Wright 2015; Miller 1998). In the current article, drug sellers’ responses to drug debts demonstrate that sometimes they enact the identities promoted by their cultural backgrounds—that is, those from “street” culture generally responded to conflict with aggression (Anderson 1999; Wright and Decker 1994), while those from more “conventional” backgrounds responded with avoidance (Baumgartner 1988; Jacques and Wright 2015). But, responses were not always in line with what was expected based on the dominant identity. Sellers sometimes considered situational influences associated with the conflict at hand and subsequently behaved in ways counter to what their cultural backgrounds would suggest. When such influences were powerful enough, counterintuitive responses could take place: Sellers from street backgrounds would respond with nonviolence. This added complexity suggests our understanding of how culture affects behavior needs to be more nuanced. It is at best a softly deterministic factor influencing offender behavior, something which has been argued for by others (see Anderson 1999; Hall 2012; Jacobs and Copes 2014; Matza 1964; Topalli 2005).

This study joins prior research in suggesting that the sale and use of hard drugs is associated with violence (see, e.g., Baumer et al. 1998; Bourgois 1988, 1995; Goldstein 1985; Jacobs 2000; Topalli et al. 2002). It further specifies this connection by arguing that it is not simply the types of the drugs sold in these markets that is responsible for this connection but more likely the types of relationships that hard-drug sellers have with their suppliers and customers. This was demonstrated by the drug sellers being less likely to use violence with their close friends but being more likely to do so with acquaintances. As other researchers have noted, the sale of hard drugs
promotes drug sellers to do business with “largely unfamiliar people” (Jacobs 1996:411) out of needs to make enough profit to survive financially (see also, Coomber and Maher 2006; Johnson et al. 1985; Mieczkowski 1986, 1990). Taken together, the results of the present study and extant research suggest then that the relationship between the sale of hard drugs and violence operates through an intermediary variable—relationships.

The results also highlight that violence and relationship norms function in similar ways among different types of illicit drug sellers. For those who sell to untrusted or less trusted individuals such as strangers or acquaintances, violence or its threat is means by which drug sellers can ensure compliance from these customers. Illicit sellers who do business with friends, however, have other mechanisms by which they can influence the behavior of these customers (see also, Dickinson 2017; Moeller and Sandberg 2015, 2017). These sellers can rely on the commonly understood expectations attached to friendship (see, e.g., Brewer, Abell, and Lyons 2014) to motivate friends to repay debts and to inhibit them from providing the police information. Sellers are likely well aware that violating these expectations may damage a customer’s feelings of self-worth (see Hogg et al. 1995) and may thereby guide how they behave. This elucidates one reason why open-air markets, characterized by transactions between strangers, feature high levels of violence, while others, such as closed markets characterized by transactions between known others, do not.

This analysis also has implications for criminological understanding of accounts. Criminology has focused primarily on how offenders use neutralizations, mechanisms similar to accounts, to manage anticipated feelings of guilt and shame that may result when offenders contemplate violating their own norms (e.g., Agnew 1994; Maruna and Copes 2005; Matza 1964; Minor 1981; Sykes and Matza 1957). Smaller bodies of research have also noted that offenders use accounts to influence how others socially identify them (e.g., Benson 1985:587; Copes 2003; Cressey 1953) and to decrease the likelihood or severity of formal punishments (e.g., Everett and Nienstedt 1999; Felson and Ribner 1981; Steinke 1992). The sellers interviewed suggested that accounts can also influence whether and how some offenders enact informal punishment, as demonstrated by some of them forgoing the use of violence when addressing debt in lieu of other forms of conflict management (see also, Felson 1982; Jacobs 1998). These sellers’ lack of professed concern with the content of debtors’ accounts indicated that their accounts did not alter how the sellers viewed or identified the debtors, but rather how they viewed themselves. Their narratives then suggested that in viewing themselves differently, they no longer considered violence as an
appropriate behavior. This is important because it demonstrates that accounts can play important roles in the de-escalation of conflict among offenders by altering the identities of offending parties and grievants.

That the sellers’ identities, and thus their professed decisions, were influenced by the receipt of accounts, their friendships with customers, and their business concerns also adds to current understanding of offender decision-making (see, e.g., Copes and Vieraitis 2009; Cornish and Clarke 1986; Jacobs and Cherbonneau 2016; Opp 1997; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). In short, this research is grounded in the notion that offenders pursue contemplated crimes if the perceived costs of these crimes are lower than the perceived benefits (Clarke and Cornish 1985). Extant research has noted that this calculus can be affected by a range of influences including, but not limited to, the presence of co-offenders (e.g., Hochstetler 2001), affect (Van Gelder et al. 2013), criminal expertise (Nee and Meenaghan 2006), and offenders’ social and personal contexts (e.g., Shover and Honaker 1992). These results add to this literature by suggesting several other influences that may affect drug sellers’ decisions: customers’ accounts, their relationships with customers, and their immediate business needs. If seen through the lens of a decision-making framework such as the rational choice perspective, the latter two influences can be considered as either “costs” or “benefits” playing into drug sellers’ decision-making processes. For instance, drug sellers may view the damage violence could do to their friendships with customers as a potential “cost.” If they view this “cost” as outweighing the “benefit” of protecting their reputations, they may then forego using violence when responding to debt in lieu of other forms of conflict management. Conversely, drug sellers may view continuing to make profit off of specific customers as a “benefit.” If this “benefit” then outweighs the costs of tolerating unpaid debt, such as increasing the chances other debtors will not repay their loans, drug sellers may allow customers more time to make good on their debts.

As previously mentioned, the nature of the research design and the characteristics of the sample informing this study may raise questions about the validity and generalizability of the results. Because the sample was gathered using a nonrandom sampling strategy, it is possible that the results herein stem in whole or in part from a selection effect and may therefore not be a reflection of drug dealer behavior writ large. Moreover, the sample featured a high proportion of individuals with socioeconomic backgrounds that were arguably different than many of drug sellers previously studied (see, e.g., Bourgois 1995; Goldstein 1985; Jacobs 1999; Johnson and Natarajan 1995). It is possible that the backgrounds of these individuals, as well
as their future educational and occupational prospects, conditioned their responses to conflict and made them more receptive to altering their responses to unpaid debts because of accounts, friendships, and business concerns. The generalizability of the results may also be impacted by the setting of the study—St. Louis, Missouri. While St. Louis may bear similarities to many other major metropolitan cities in terms of aggregate demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, it is possible that there are systematic differences between St. Louis drug sellers and those from elsewhere. The purpose of this study, however, is not to determine the generalizability of its results for different populations (see generally, Laub and Sampson 2003:251-52; Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002: 478) but to instead develop theoretical insights about the fluidity of offender identities and behavior and their possible susceptibility to situational variables that can later be tested for empirical validity and generalizability using quantitative methodologies. Despite these limitations, then, the present study still offers important contributions that can inform future research into identities and decision-making among illicit drug sellers.

Research into drug market conflict has noted for some time that illicit drug sellers use a broad repertoire of conflict management strategies when addressing problems with others beyond just violence (e.g., Jacques 2010; Jacques and Wright 2008, 2010; Taylor 2007). For instance, Jacques (2010) and Jacques and Wright (2008, 2010, 2015) argue that drug sellers may respond to conflict by tolerating the offense and doing nothing, by avoiding the source of the conflict, by making unfair trades with wrongdoers (i.e., “fraudulent retaliation”), or by clandestinely stealing or vandalizing others’ property (i.e., “stealth retaliation”). They suggest that the strategies drug sellers’ use are guided by their socioeconomic backgrounds and the cultural imperatives, future prospects, and fears of arrest that stem from these backgrounds. The present study further specifies drug sellers’ decision-making processes by arguing that these decisions are also guided by drug sellers’ identities and, furthermore, that their identities and decisions are fluid constructs that may be influenced by situational variables such as accounts, the character of their relationships with specific others, and business interests.

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Notes
1. Although the term “accounts” can be considered synonymous with other terms such as narratives, story lines, or neutralizations, herein I use the term in accordance with a body of literature across disciplines that conceptually defines accounts as distinct from these other concepts (see, e.g., Fritsche 2002; Orbuch 1997; Schonbach 1990; Scott and Lyman 1968). As used here, accounts are retrospective verbal statements given by individuals to others for their untoward behavior (Scott and Lyman 1968). This contrasts with narratives, which do not necessarily include “attributional statements of causality or responsibility” and do not always “develop in response to a troubling . . . event” (Davis 2000:38). Accounts also differ from story lines, as conceptualized by Agnew (2006), in that story lines refer to the “events and conditions leading up to a crime” (p. 120) and not how individuals explain their actions. Finally, accounts differ from neutralizations because they are always provided following a conflictual situation and are given with the intention of assuaging external sanctions. Neutralizations, on the other hand, are sometimes used prior to an offense and are undertaken with the intention of ameliorating internal sanctions (Sykes and Matza 1957).
2. Eight of the sellers also sold in “semiopen markets” such as music festivals, raves, and clubs to customers without need of a prior introduction or trusted relationship—provided that customers did not “look out of place” (see May and Hough 2004:553). The present study draws solely on interview data pertaining to the sellers’ activities in closed markets as credit was not extended to customers in semiopen markets.
3. The names used throughout are pseudonyms chosen either by myself or the respective informant.
4. Throughout this article, ellipses represent words or phrases that have been omitted for the sake of clarity.
5. Words and phrases in brackets are intended to clarify the informants’ quotes.
References


**Author biography**

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