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“The Game Turns on You” Crack, Sex, Gender, and Power in Small-Town Ohio

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Exchanges of sex for crack cocaine have received much attention from public health researchers and ethnographers of substance abuse. These exchanges are often viewed as one-dimensional relationships in which men use their access to crack cocaine and women’s dependence on the drug to exploit them sexually. Drawing on in-depth interview data gathered during three years of research conducted in central Ohio, this article examines the relationship between sexual behavior and crack cocaine use from both male and female perspectives. Bourdieu’s concept of *fields* is then applied to illuminate the relational dimensions of gender, sex, and power within this local crack-cocaine using scene, while also illustrating the domination inherent in most scenarios involving crack-for-sex exchange. Implications for possible interventions based on this analysis are also discussed.

Keywords: *crack cocaine; sex; fields; Bourdieu*

The advent of “crack” or “rock” cocaine as a drug-use trend had a broad impact on American society in the late twentieth century. Although originally reported in coastal urban centers such as New York City, Los

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Angeles, and Miami, by the late 1980s, crack cocaine markets were well established throughout the United States (Inciardi 1987; Mieczkowski 1990; Hamid 1992; Adler 1995; Golub and Johnson 1996; Agar 2003). Because its most destructive effects were concentrated in poor urban communities, threatening images associated with crack cocaine soon became embedded in popular depictions of “inner-city” life (Humphries 1998; Furst et al. 1999; Koehnecke 2001). Some especially disturbing trends related to sexual violence, such as rape and physical attack, committed largely by men on women (Bourgeois 1996; Falck et al. 2001; Siegal et al. 2000); and “unsafe” sex acts, committed by both men and women, largely in situations of male domination and female exploitation (He et al. 1998; Inciardi 1993; Carlson and Siegal 1991; Logan and Leukefeld 2000).

As these associations became widely publicized, several myths about crack also gained quick currency. One belief was that crack’s physical effects were so powerful that initiates were “hooked” immediately on first use and quickly descended into a ceaseless cycle of crack seeking (Reinarman and Levine 2004). Another myth associated crack’s effects with a desire for (and openness to) unprecedented levels of sexual activity. This is sometimes referred to as the “hypersexuality” myth (Maher 1996; Furst et al. 1999; Moore 2004). These two powerful myths, in turn, reinforced the prevalent image of “crack whores”—sometimes known as “skeezers” or “strawberries”—women who were willing to perform any debasing sexual act in exchange for even a very small amount of crack cocaine (Fullilove, Lown, and Fullilove 1992).

The sexual behavior of women crack users became a major concern of researchers as well. As Maher (1996) critically noted, “women crack users who engage in sexual practices are readily positioned as vectors of AIDS, drug use, and moral contamination” (p. 144). Much of the public health literature on the “crack–sex nexus” was indeed focused on the potential for increased transmission of the HIV/AIDS virus due to unprotected and frequent sexual activity among crack users (Booth, Watters, and Chitwood 1993; Edlin et al. 1994; Word and Bowser 1997; Tortu et al. 1998; Kwiatkowski and Booth 2000; Ross and Williams 2001). These investigations often linked crack cocaine use to increased impulsivity or relaxed attitudes toward condom use (Ellerbrock et al. 1995; Lejuez et al. 2005; Timpson et al. 2001; McCoy and Wasserman 2001; Perlman et al. 1999; Nyamathi, Bennett, and Leake 1995). Other researchers examined predisposing factors within crack-abusing women, such as individual psychosocial characteristics or histories of sexual abuse and violence in the home (Longshore et al. 1998; Dunlap et al. 2004; Fullilove, Lown, and Fullilove 1992; Boyd and Guthrie 1996; Boyd et al. 1998; Young and Boyd 2000; Sharpe 2005).

Some scholars viewed the crack epidemic and the sexual behavior that accompanied it as either an effect or a reflection of broader structural conditions. For these authors, the harsh environment of the inner-city streets, the lack of other sources of income aside from crack selling and prostitution, and the objectification and degradation of women in general shaped and intensified the effects of crack with destructive and often tragic results (Carlson and Siegal 1991; Williams 1993; Fullilove, Lown, and Fullilove 1992; Inciardi 1993; Ratner 1993; Henderson, Boyd, and Mieczkowski 1994; Maher and Daly 1996; Sharpe 2005). As stated by Bourgois and Dunlap (1993), “Crack is merely the latest medium through which the already desperate are expressing publicly their suffering and hopelessness” (p. 98). Carlson (1996) argued that exchanging sex for crack was a means for those without resources to participate in capitalist society in structural and symbolic terms, while Bourgois (2003) viewed crack–sex exchanges as a perverse by-product of the “structural violence” inflicted on marginalized groups by oppressive social forces.

The focus of this research, however, was rarely women’s *agency* but rather their *domination*—by the powers of an addictive substance, by society at large, or by males within their immediate milieu. In fact, Anderson (2005) has identified an undue emphasis on the “pathology and powerlessness” of women in the drug research literature. Ironically, perhaps, studies of sex workers were more likely to portray women as active agents who sought to negotiate and reduce risk, although their ability to do so was also highly contingent on other factors, such as degree of substance dependency and the circumstances of exchange (Miller 1995; Maher 1996; Green, Day, and Ward, 2000; Erickson et al. 2000; Sterk 2000; Roche, Neaigus, and Miller 2005). Studies that focused on the role of women in the underground drug economy—as sellers or intermediaries, for example—also tended to grant them more agency, although this was within a realm that was highly dominated by men (Taylor 1993; Sterk 1999; Anderson 2005; Maher and Daly 1996).

This article adds to the scholarly literature concerning the interrelationship of crack cocaine use, sexual behavior, and social context through an examination of beliefs and experiences surrounding sexual behavior among recent crack cocaine users living in small towns in central Ohio. To date, most research on sex and crack use has been focused on major urban areas of the United States, though important work has also been done in small cities (Carlson and Siegal 1991; Williams 1993) and rural areas (Forney, Inciardi, and Lockwood 1992; Brown and Trujillo 2003; Brown and Smith 2006; Draus and Carlson 2007). In addition, we offer an original theoretical

contribution, analyzing this dynamic of gender and power using the concept of *champs* or *fields*, drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1985). Along with the related concepts of *capitals* (Bourdieu 1986) and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), fields have been widely employed in the sociology of culture and social class and in other diverse areas such as the sociology of health (Williams 1995), social movements (Crossley 1999), economics (Aldridge 1998), sports (McGillivray, Fearn, and McIntosh 2005) and gay sexuality (Westhaver 2006). However, they have not been applied to discussions of crack cocaine and sexual behavior. When examined from this perspective, crack–sex exchange emerges not as a mechanistic result of pharmacology, psychology, or social environment but rather as a complex, contested interaction of factors within a defined sociocultural space.

Setting and Method

This study results from three years of ethnographic field research, conducted in conjunction with a five-year epidemiological study investigating patterns of illicit stimulant use in central Ohio. The epidemiological study employed respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997; Draus et al. 2005), to recruit 249 recent (last thirty days) users of illicit stimulants (cocaine, crack cocaine, or methamphetamine) in three adjacent counties with populations ranging from approximately 47,000 to 55,000 persons in areas that are probably best described as the “rural–urban fringe” (Sharp and Clark 2008).

As other researchers have documented, the process of recruiting “hidden populations” (Wiebel 1990) is always difficult, and this is complicated even further by the social characteristics of rural areas (Brown 2003). Before any recruitment could occur, extensive fieldwork was conducted in a process of “ethnographic mapping” (Watters and Biernacki 1989) designed to (1) identify “seeds” for the sampling plan and (2) investigate the physical and social contexts in which illicit stimulant use occurred (Clatts et al. 2002). Throughout the project, the first author and several research assistants engaged in participant observation activities in diverse settings, from tattoo parlors and local bars to yard sales, county fairs, and demolition derbies. Several hundred pages of field notes were written in the course of the recruitment process. This process and the important role that ethnographic methods played in it are described in detail elsewhere (Draus et al. 2005).

As we found in our recruitment efforts, it is difficult to talk openly about illicit drug use and sexual behavior, much less actually witness them, in “natural” settings, such as the bars or front porches where researchers were

engaging in participant observation activity. Ideals of ethnographic immersion aside, the goal of inserting oneself into such personal and sensitive realms is often impractical and quite possibly unethical (Vanderstaay 2005). For this reason, in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups were also conducted with ninety-seven different individuals. The interviews were semistructured, covering various “domains” of experience, from individual social history and community involvement to drug use practices, health issues, and sexual behavior.

Most participants were active and former drug users, though some were family members or substance abuse counselors. They were contacted directly through fieldwork or were referred by other study participants or community members. Some were interviewed as many as five times, and fourteen of them returned for one or more follow-up interviews at different stages of the project. Of the qualitative interviews conducted, forty-three involved recent crack cocaine users, and seven involved recovering crack cocaine users. All participants were over age eighteen, all were legal residents of the target counties, and all had signed an informed consent approved by the Wright State University Institutional Review Board. Interviews were conducted in private, secure locations, and most lasted between one and two hours. Participants were compensated \$20, regardless of the amount of time they spent. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and later coded and analyzed by the first author using the software package NVivo, which is designed for in-depth examination of rich qualitative data (Richards 1999).

The interviews were explicitly framed as voluntary conversations where the interviewer (first author) was learning from the participants’ knowledge and experience as “insiders” occupying a particular social world (Spradley 1979). Because of this, they were open-ended and tended to be free flowing. As the project became more established in the communities and as the first author developed greater rapport with participants, interviews evolved into more elaborate discussions. Recurrent themes were noted, and some of these themes were then explored in greater detail, either within the initial interview, in follow-up interviews, or in focus groups. Conversations that began with simple questions concerning sexual behavior related to crack use often moved into the realm of social contexts, interactions, and the embedded meanings and perspectives of participants themselves (Lofland 1972; Hunt 2005). In particular, we began to see how both men and women interpreted these relations as “games,” where each player was trying to gain advantage over the other. At this stage, we began to focus specifically on the power relations that surrounded these highly charged interactions.

The discussion below begins with a broad overview of participants' views of the relationship between crack cocaine use and sexual behavior, focused on how these perspectives differ according to gender. Then, we delve into more extensive accounts offered by two participants, one male and one female, who served as key informants. The first, Jerome, was an African American man in his early fifties, who had used crack cocaine for approximately twenty years, mostly in the same small Ohio town (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). He had also been a crack cocaine dealer and supplier at different points in his "career." He was interviewed two times at length, though we had many more informal discussions over the course of the project because he was closely associated with other participants as well. Lana, an African American woman in her early forties, also had an extensive amount of experience in and around the drug scene in this small town, where she was born and raised. She was interviewed three times at length and also participated in several focus groups and many informal conversations in the course of the three years of field research.

There are some limitations to this research that should be noted up front. First of all, we exercised some discretion in the selection of participants for extended or multiple interviews. Largely, this was based on the demonstrated knowledge base of these particular individuals. For example, after initial interviews, it was possible to identify who had experience with crack and sexual exchange and who was willing to talk about those experiences. The majority of those willing to talk in greater detail about their own sexual activity and crack cocaine use were African American men and women. This is especially interesting, given that the majority of crack cocaine users in the sample were white men. We also found that African American women were more likely to admit to engaging in sex-for-crack exchanges and reported more threats of violence as well as actual rape and attack. However, we cannot say if this reflects a higher level of risk based on racial group, a greater openness concerning discussion of such issues, or merely individual-level variation.

As Carlson and Siegal (1991) and Inciardi (1993) have noted, self-reported accounts of sexual behavior are especially susceptible to distortion and hyperbole. We tried to limit this through careful questioning and repeat interviewing, but this must be considered when evaluating the findings presented here. It is also quite possible that gender or cultural dynamics within interview situations may have influenced the accounts that were given, either in a positive or a negative sense, as some participants may have been more or less willing to describe feelings or experiences related to sexual activity and crack use.

Crack and Sex: Drug Effects and Gender

Most of the accounts provided by participants belied the myth that the use of crack cocaine itself causes people to become more sexually active. As articulated by Danny, a forty-one-year-old white man, extensive crack use was just as likely to have the opposite effect:

You're just exhausted from smoking dope and you're gonna go lay down and set there and stare at the ceiling for about six hours, ya know? You can't sleep, you can't eat, you can't have sex, a lot of people say that they do, but they're lying.

When asked if his crack use affected his sexual behavior, a forty-three-year-old African American man named Calvin responded, "Oh hell yeah. You don't get none. You're not interested. You don't feel like having sex and your dick won't get hard." Renee, a forty-one-year-old white woman, also stated that when she was using crack,

I have no desire whatsoever. None. I'm not sexually promiscuous, never have been, and I just, I don't want it. I don't wanna nothin' to do with it. I don't want no one to touch me or anything. I just wanna keep gettin' high.

In fact, she specifically avoided using with men for this reason. Lana also stated that she preferred to smoke crack with other women because,

I don't like getting high with males because they always want somethin', and they either want to suck their dick or they want some pussy and I'm not into that when I'm getting high.

Alexis, a twenty-nine-year-old white woman, began smoking crack while working as a prostitute in a larger nearby city. As for the effects of the crack itself, however, she simply said, "If I just smoke crack, then I don't want to have sex, I don't want anybody to look at me or touch me." Rory, a twenty-one-year-old woman of white and African American parentage, likewise stated, "I was never horny, and I never got horny off of it. I didn't even wanna have sex. The only reason why I did was so I could get high. That's how it affected me."

Aside from Alexis, no other participants admitted to engaging in formal prostitution. Three participants, however, made reference to "tricking." Rory stated, "I wasn't a prostitute, I mean go out on the street, and do stuff

like that, but there was a couple dope boys, ya know, that I did things with, to get crack. I don't know if that's considered a prostitute or not, but I don't consider it that." When asked if she used a condom during these episodes, she replied, "I didn't even think about that, I just thought about getting high . . . and then too paranoid to go out and get money so I would just do some-thin' with them because they were already there."

Others made reference to the more informal practice of "hooking up." Felicia, a thirty-three-year-old African American woman, stated that she had exchanged sex for money about "four or five times" in the previous six months. She said that it usually occurred when "we'd be at a friend's house or I run into the person and we normally exchange like that and they'll be like, hey let's hook up." She emphasized that these were people she already knew, not people she met on the street.

Men tended to view sex-for-crack exchange in a matter-of-fact manner. In a focus group consisting entirely of men who had recently smoked crack, Isaac stated that women would be less likely to participate in paid research interviews because it would be "easier" for them to simply have sex with a crack dealer:

Instead of coming down and here and being seen, they can just go straight to the dope man's house and lay it with dope man, do it with the dope man, get high all they want to. That's what I'm saying see cause I watched it happen last night.

Elmer, a twenty-three-year-old white man, agreed, saying, "Any female who's a crack head ain't gonna care."

Crack-Sex Negotiations

Crack-sex exchanges, as described by women participants, often involved intense bargaining and implicit or explicit coercion, including threats of physical violence. Nadine, a forty-one-year-old African American woman, said, "If I don't have no feelings for them I'm just gonna go ahead and do what they want me to do to them." However, she would try other means of avoiding sex when possible. She described one situation where she was in a hotel bathroom with a man who kept buying more crack for her while trying to convince her to have sex:

I would tell [him] well I'm getting ready to go and he'd say I'll go get some more, don't go no where. . . . I was more or less playing him, trying to buy him before I have to do anything.

This started at around eleven o' clock at night, and they went through four "twenty-rocks," while she tried to "talk my way out of having sex with him." However, he made her stay in the bathroom "until he got what he wanted" sometime early the next morning.

A similar situation to that described by Nadine, albeit with a different result, was recounted by Lana:

Well, he did want sex until he started smoking. . . . I guess when he smokes he can't do nothing . . . but when they come down that's a different story, that's when either you're gone, party's over and you ain't giving up nothing.

Another situation that was described by study participants involved two women, who were themselves sexually involved with each other, visiting local bars to attract the interest of men who were looking for crack but also expected sex. One of the women was African American, the other was racially "mixed," and the men whom they sought to attract were mostly white. The women had ready access to crack suppliers but no money to purchase the drug, while the situation of the "target" male was exactly the reverse. Such a situation was preferable because it involved less isolation with a man, thus reducing sexual risk.

For women, as noted above, the relationship between sexual behavior and crack cocaine had little to do with sexual excitement. From the women's standpoint, the ideal situation involved no sexual exchange at all. Mary, who was openly a lesbian, also had to face the expectation of exchanging sex with men when she purchased crack cocaine. She declared,

I don't give 'em sex. I said, I got money, and I said, I'll give you a little bit if you go get it for me, a little bit a rock, okay and they don't touch me, because see when I was younger, when I was twenty-one, I could lift three hundred and fifty pounds on my back and press three hundred and fifty pounds on my legs. I could kick more than one man's ass at a time. But I'm old now, and I can't fight like I could, but they still remember that reputation and therefore they're still scared of me.

Crack, Sex, and Violence

Some crack-related sexual encounters also involved either threats or actual violence. As mentioned above, Nadine was threatened with physical violence during her extended encounter in the hotel bathroom. Others had

much worse outcomes. On one occasion, Felicia was attacked by a man she met in a bar:

He invited me and my cousin to come over and drink, and, it just got crazy. Like I said, I was getting ready to go home and, I never gave him no indication that I was gonna lay down with him, and he said let's go lay down and I said I didn't wanna lay down, and he got violent.

In that case, she fought back with a kitchen knife. The police were called, and the man ended up in the hospital.

However, Felicia also described another incident that occurred in a larger nearby city, where she sometimes traveled to smoke crack:

I told him "no" and he, first ripped my panties off through my pants and I just kept telling him "no," well course it was someone that I knew, so I didn't make a police report or nothing like that, but he was just like "no you gonna, ya know have sex with me" and I'm like "no I don't want to" and he just kinda strong-armed me. . . .

Even more disturbing was an episode recounted by Rory after going to the same city to buy and smoke a "twenty-piece" of crack. She said, "I was kidnapped, raped and assaulted for three days, beat for three days, the guy held me in a room and raped me and, [pause] raped me and like messed up my face where I looked like I was in a car accident." She was hospitalized as a result of the incident but never filed charges or sought professional counseling, saying, "I just been dealing with it on my own, it's driving me crazy, though. I just don't believe in asking anybody for help."

This is the most extreme episode of violence recounted in this study. Notably, it occurred outside the town itself. However, the same dynamic of gender domination was present in most other accounts of sex-for-crack exchanges. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women did not have to go outside their own intimate relationships to encounter threats of violence related to sex and crack use. As Nadine reported concerning her fiancé,

we use crack [and] drink and he would accuse me of tricking for crack, after he got high, he would accuse me of being with different guys and then it turned into where he'd be beating me with his fist or with objects.

In this case, it is the man's assumption of the woman's sexual behavior related to crack that serves as the basis for anger and violent domination.

Dope Boys and Sugar Daddies

When asked about the assumption, among men, that women could get crack whenever they wanted simply by exchanging sex for it, Lana provided a complicated response. On one hand, she affirmed this, saying, "I tried to hang around females because I know females can get money quicker than a male." However, she also stated that this was something she expressly tried to avoid through engaging men in other ways, offering them conversation, attention, or companionship instead of sex in return for sharing drugs:

That's what I usually try to do, because if you know how to use your mouth-piece then you don't have to lay down with nobody to get no money for no drugs. A dope boy you have to, though.

As Lana's statement implies, "dope boys" or crack dealers were one category of men who were in a powerful position over women who could not afford to buy crack outright. Some women also admitted regularly having sex with "sugar daddies," men who provided them with money that they then used to buy crack. Rory, who had several such relationships, explained how one of them came about:

I just found out about one of 'em because I found out other girls were going there and then he just ended up just liking me, ya know, didn't mess with other girls no more, so I could go there and just ask him for money without doing anything and he would give it to me. There were some times when I would do something so I could get extra.

All of her sugar daddies were older white men, and though she did have sex with them, this was something she actively tried to avoid:

[I would] tell 'em a lame excuse sometimes when I was already high, try to come up with something and lie about it, or sometimes I would start up and then he, he'd just give it to me, I wouldn't have to do a favor for the money anymore, 'cause he was actually starting to care about me, ya know.

The Lure of Sex, the Lure of the Drug

Jerome, one of our key informants, stated straightforwardly that "when a guy gets high he wants to have sex, when women get high it turns them

off from sex, so women will use sex in order to continue on getting the money in order to get high.” He offered some useful insights into the crack–sex dynamic as it related to both men and women:

Okay when I take a hit, first thing come to my mind is sex. Now a woman, they don’t feel that way . . . but they also know that men feel that way . . . but if he take more than one hit then she knows that she can sit there and smoke with him all night and he won’t be able to do anything . . . because he can think sex but his genitals won’t work, so girls use, the lure of sex in order to get high, guys use the lure of the drug in order to get sex, you follow me?

According to Jerome, a significant shift in power sometimes took place when a woman was able to exert her own influence in a skillful way:

After she’s been there for a while and she’s gotten high, and she’s been used or been abused, there a point where she, she won’t do that, she’ll say listen, give me mine up front and I’ll do it but if you can’t I’m only gonna do it for three, four minutes, if you don’t get off by then I’m quitting . . . so now it’s so much that he has the power, ya know the power has been shifted, see, cause now she knows what he can do and can’t do . . . she didn’t know what he can do and what he can’t do, then he has the power, but once she realizes, now she has the power . . . now she has the power . . . I’ve seen guys do it, she can’t do him but he just wants to see her naked and long as he can get to look at her, he can fantasize but he can’t really do anything. . . .

When asked about the relationship between crack cocaine and the abuse of women, Jerome responded,

Related to crack, yea, it’s a lot a abuse, and not so much . . . physical as it is mental . . . feeling the need that you wanna get high real bad, and the only way you can get high is you have to be, be able to degrade yourself to do certain acts, ya know, sexually.

On the male side, Jerome agreed that power over women was definitely a part of the drug’s appeal, especially among those who sold it:

That’s why everybody wants to be a dope boy. . . . ’Cause these guys don’t smoke and they need possession, and they’ll make her go suck their dick or they’ll make her fuck everybody in the room. . . . That’s pretty common, that’s why everybody wants to be a dope boy. The lure, it’s not so much . . . for the money they’re making, as it is the power, or the lure of sex that you can get, because if you find a girl out there, if she’s smoking dope, you can,

you can have her one way or another, you eventually, if you don't get her right away but you will eventually have her, but she'll come down, she won't have enough money . . . and she'll trade herself for it, so that's why most . . . [a] lot of these guys wouldn't even have sex if it wasn't for dope.

The Game Turns on You

Lana concurred with Jerome's statements that for dealers in particular, sex-for-crack exchanges are more about power than about any kind of sexual attraction or desire:

With a dope boy it's a power thing, because as long as he has the dope in his hand, he knows he got power, he could probably get five girls at one time suck his dick, that's how powerful that shit is, I think it is.

With other men, however, relations of power were much more malleable, although they might aspire to the same level of domination that dope boys exercised. Lana stated straightforwardly that men who smoke crack with women "always want something." The paradox of this phenomenon was that many men, in accordance with findings cited above, were unable to achieve sexual climax when they were using crack. However, Lana claimed, "they still wanna try."

They'll sit there and know that they can't do nuthin'—I ran into one last night—I've been doing him for a while and stuff just got carried away and, he was smoking and stuff and like I said they always want head [oral sex] . . . and I'm doing that and it's not doing nuthin', I'm like then why, why bother?

This very fact, however, could sometimes be used by a woman as a means of limiting her involvement with a man, while simultaneously maximizing her "return." In describing her "negotiations" with men, Lana explained,

Sometimes you can use your mouth piece and talk where you don't have to do nuthin'; sometime they're like no, no, no cause they're tired a getting used and then you have to say well I'll do this and they'll say well okay and then you end up having to do something before you get the money, to go get it, but after that you're cool, ain't nuttin' but a couple minutes cause you know what I mean, well come on, I wanna go, let's just get this over. . . .

In such cases—in most cases—Lana stated, “It’s not about sex. It’s just about giving him what he wants so you can get what you want.” This statement characterizes the crack-for-sex exchange as a kind of sexual barter, with each party seeking to get the better of the deal but both getting something that they want. Also significant is her use of the term *getting used*, implying acknowledgment that the man is being manipulated sexually. However, Lana’s later experiences, which involved providing regular sexual favors to sugar daddies for money that she could use to buy crack, revealed the downside of relying on one’s bodily “capital” as the primary source of leverage in such deals.

It used to be somethin’ I didn’t do, but the longer you’re in the game, [it]turns on you. Sometimes you gotta do something you don’t wanna do to get what you want, and that’s what I’ve been doing. . . .

Crack and the Concept of Fields

Lana’s reference to the crack cocaine game reveals the dynamic aspect of gender-power relations within this world of drug-related social relations. To further illuminate this, we turn to Bourdieu’s concept of champs or fields. According to Bourdieu, fields are arenas of struggle for control over valued resources or capitals (Bourdieu 1986). Dominant and subordinate positions within a field are based on types and amounts of capital that one may access. These positions, in turn, impose on actors specific forms of struggle or “rules of the game.” The advantage of the concept of the field is that it allows one to think *relationally* about the shifting terrain of power relations that underlie local worlds where the interactions of structure and agency are played out in ways that are patterned but also quite variable (Schwartz 1997).

In Bourdieu’s (1985) conception, all fields are sites of resistance as well as domination, and advantages may shift from one player to another according to one’s position in the field and one’s access to relevant capitals:

Knowledge of the position occupied in this space contains information as to the agents’ intrinsic properties (their condition) and their relational properties (their position). This is seen particularly clearly in the case of the occupants of the intermediate or middle positions, who . . . owe a number of their most typical properties to the fact that they are situated between the two poles of the field . . . and that they are balanced between the two extreme positions. (P. 725)

Bourdieu divides capital into four main categories: economic capital, which reflects one's access to money or other valued material resources; cultural capital, which involves one's knowledge and experience; social capital, which pertains to one's networks and relations; and symbolic capital, which is based on one's status, honor, or prestige. A fifth category, which Bourdieu introduced in later work, is that of physical or "bodily" capital, which describes the finite resources that are rooted in one's own biological person (Westhaver 2006; McGillivray, Fearn, and McIntosh 2005). In real social hierarchies, these categories naturally overlap, as economic capital might also result in more social or symbolic capital and vice versa. Likewise, they may also combine or converge within a single person. Bourdieu has a term for this embedded conglomeration of resources: *habitus*. It is inclusive of acquired social knowledge as well as social, ethnic, or cultural ties and all the other capitals that a particular person may access. As Peillon (1998) has written, "it is through habitus that agents in the field respond meaningfully to how a situation develops: they improvise a course of action, initiate unexpected moves" (p. 220).

An illegal drug scene is a classic example of a largely self-contained field characterized by unequal positions along a hierarchy determined by access to or control over desired capitals (Maher and Daly 1996). Within the local crack-using scene, these positions might overlap significantly, or one might occupy several positions at once in relation to different sets of other "players" (Draus and Carlson 2007; Daniulaityte, Carlson, and Siegal 2007). Within each relationship, one's relative position has a different significance as far as one's ability to dictate terms. This is largely dictated by one's access to various capitals. The most obvious form of capital, which both creates and energizes the entire field, is access to crack cocaine itself. All the games, manipulations, and machinations that occur within the field are made possible by the fact that possession of the drug is legally restricted, access is financially constrained, and use is compulsive. However, there are various other capitals that participants might draw on while occupying different positions within the field.

Burt (1992) argues that individual players may augment their position in a benefit-maximizing game not only through possession of knowledge or resources but through access to multiple nonoverlapping networks. This situation is nicely illustrated by the tactics of the illegal drug "runner," who is able to maximize his or her own benefit best when keeping networks separate and providing a bridge across the "holes" or gaps that divide them. If everyone knows the same people, there is no need for such a role. However, even if one is able to exploit a position within a field, at the crux

of several networks, this position may not be stable. Access to networks contracts or expands quickly in an illegitimate drug scene, where suppliers may be “open for business” one day and “shut down” by law enforcement the next.

The importance of the concept of fields and the connected concept of capitals is that they allow us to see how multiple dynamic variables may exist in relation to each other, that within particular situations different variables may be “in play” and outcomes may be negotiated and contested. This “relational” perspective contrasts sharply with the standard logico-deductive or “substantialist” model of social science research, which tends to look for and focus on those independent variables or “risk factors” that are statistically predictive of particular outcomes (Emirbayer 1997). For example, substance dependence, race, gender, and social class or conglomerate measures of “social support” or “social capital” may be evaluated as positive or negative predictors of risky sexual behavior. In fact, *all* of these may be predictive of sexual risk to some degree and probably are. Unfortunately, that does not tell us much about what will occur in any particular situation, nor does it explain why those who are categorically *at risk* might *willingly* engage in behavior that is dangerous or degrading. Absent a relational perspective, the correlated variable is implicitly assigned the causal role. This approach, we argue, misses an essential dynamic element of these charged and contested relations.

For example, from the perspective of disease or violence prevention, it may appear that individuals involved in illegal drug scenes persistently “ignore” risk. The standard assumption is that such individuals are “risk seeking,” that certain drugs may necessarily result in risk taking, or that women are simply being coerced or exploited. However, part of the reason why risk is neglected may be that the *most severely negative outcome* of a course of action is rarely perceived as an *inevitable* result at the time behavior occurs. Rather, it is seen as one possible negative outcome that may occur if one does not “play one’s cards right.” From the woman’s standpoint, the desire of men to extract sexual favors in exchange for providing money or crack to a woman was a given. Within the framework of this near-certain expectation, women must calculate the odds, so to speak, that they will be forced into situations that they cannot control. Sharpe has discussed the “role negotiation” of crack-using women as an attempt to maintain some degree of power and control, with “discretionary partner selection” being the primary means by which women protected themselves against predation. In her analysis, the ability of women to do this was

largely determined by “relative desperation” and “crack craving” (Sharpe 2005, p. 26).

The pharmacology of crack cocaine is almost certainly a contributing factor to sexual or other risk-taking behavior. These are dynamic variables themselves, however, and may fluctuate significantly from person to person or situation to situation. Ethnographic methods are necessarily attuned to these relational characteristics, as they seek to understand how individuals see themselves and their actions as shaped by particular contexts. These interviews, like previous research, suggest that drug effects themselves are not determinative of that behavior. Research on users’ own views of the relationship between particular types of drugs and sexual effects has shown considerable divergence by gender (Carlson 1999), especially in the case of cocaine, with men more likely than women to report “aphrodisiac” effects (Rawson et al. 2002). In our findings, neither men nor women (with one exception) reported an increase in sexual desire as a result of crack use. Rather, the gender divergence centered on issues of power and control.

This is also supported by other research. Sterk-Elifson (1996) has shown that fears of sexual domination related to drug sharing were common among middle-class cocaine-using women, and an ethnographic study of crack-using prostitutes in Columbus, Ohio (Miller 1995), found that violence and sexual degradation of women served to maintain a symbolic hierarchy of power on the streets of that city. Based on their work in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, Maher and Daly (1996) likewise concluded that the crack cocaine economy was extremely stratified by gender and heightened the sexual subjugation of women.

We have found that crack cocaine use in these small Ohio towns, though it does not take place in the “street” per se, is unfortunately accompanied by some of the same ritualistic and misogynistic tendencies as elsewhere. As we have shown, men would often minimize the significance of sex-for-crack exchanges or simply take them for granted. Ironically, their interpretation cast the woman in the role of power, implying that women, unlike men, can simply have sex for crack or money instead of working or “hustling” to get money to buy it. This resentment might add to the male crack user’s desire to exert sexual power when he has the chance, even though the majority of men interviewed for this study claimed to have no desire for sex when they were using crack. These taken-for-granted associations concerning crack cocaine, gender, and sexual behavior may be seen as a prime example of what Bourdieu termed *symbolic violence*, that is, a working

ideology that serves to legitimate and cement gender domination within a field of power (Schwartz 1997).

This study supports the claim, also made by Sharpe (2005), that partner selection is a major means by which women seek to structure interactions to their advantage. Some partners, such as dope boys, can make unilateral demands with no negotiation because they control the source of the desired substance, and they are typically not users of it themselves. However, in between the “ideal” male partner, who makes no demands at all, and the dope dealer, who makes iron demands, there is a whole range of relationships and situations in which the balance of power and control is in play, fluid, and contested. A woman’s degree of dependence on a drug such as crack cocaine is not a stable variable either. At different points in her drug-using career or even at different points during a given day or week, a woman may be more or less able to stand up to the demands of men and structure a relation in one’s favor. To borrow Lana’s words, the difference between “giving him what he wants so you can get what you want” and doing “something you don’t wanna do to get what you want” may seem slight. However, one statement implies an equal exchange of goods, while the other invokes a kind of surrender. The difference is entirely situational and relational and will be missed by a simple correlation of variables.

In some social sites, the field of power is “tilted” against women. For example, the necessity of insulating dope boys from police surveillance produces a sort of cocoon, the inner layers of which also tend to be dominated by men. Women who enter this realm for the purposes of obtaining crack are subject to this male power. As Lana stated, “if it’s a dope boy, you have to.” According to Jerome, the wielding of power over women is one of the major attractions of becoming a dope boy. All incidents of interpersonal violence described by participants took place in private locations—hotel rooms, apartments, or houses. The most violent and disturbing example contained here is that shared by Rory, who found herself alone in another city in an anonymous hotel room occupied by multiple men.

Other factors, however, may also mediate the risk: in the case of Mary, who was an acknowledged lesbian with a reputation for physical toughness, the likelihood of sexual demands was less than it was for other women—although she was not immune either. The other way she guarded against it was by always having her own money to pay for her drugs directly—financial capital negating the need for bodily capital. Felicia relied on bodily capital in another way, resisting violence with violence,

though this strategy had significant dangers. Other women protected themselves by simply sticking together, not using crack alone with men, or not using with men at all—even if they needed men to *access* crack. Risk was reduced by asserting control over the field of relations by choosing not to enter certain sites or “arenas” at all.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that issues of gender and power are central to risk reduction among crack cocaine users in rural as well as urban areas and that gender-based approaches to violence and sexual risk are necessary (Sterk 2002). However, such programs must be adapted to the particular social context. Such “tailored interventions” might operate on a variety of levels (Campbell and Quintiliani 2006). Ethnographic understandings of crack–sex relations may contribute to peer education that allows women to share experience, to “coach” each other in the techniques of risk reduction: not just how to use a condom but how to negotiate interaction, how to offer men the opportunity to fantasize rather than engaging in actual sexual acts, how to select interaction sites and contexts that are demonstrably safer, how to screen out potentially violent partners, and so on (Roche, Neaigus, and Miller 2005). Building peer networks among women in locally specific drug scenes may also yield unanticipated benefits in other areas as well by enhancing the power and agency of women generally. The possibility of underlying issues of trauma and depression, especially in women, should inform these intervention efforts (Fullilove, Lown and Fullilove 1992; Young and Boyd 2000). In the case of drug-using couples, interpersonal dynamics must also be considered as a factor that may contribute to continued risk exposure (Simmons 2006). By the same token, men might also be more systematically educated on issues of gender domination.

However, while such efforts to alter the habitus of individuals (or groups) may be important and effective on one level, a field-based analysis suggests that addressing the *structure of the field itself* may be a more promising risk-reduction strategy. In the end, prevention efforts that are targeted at the level of social network, the local community, or even the state hold more promise for long-term reduction of risk than those that focus primarily on individual behaviors and characteristics (Reppucci, Woolard, and Fried 1999). The illegality of crack, which makes a fairly cheap drug into a treasured commodity, energizes the entire field, granting positions of power by virtue of one’s access to it. Although the drug traffickers and dealers sit at the top of

the crack field and dictate “the rate of exchange” within it, they do not ultimately control the structures that make the field possible: that power or *meta-capital* lies with the state (Peillon 1998; Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage 1994). As with national and international drug markets, the form and severity of local prohibition shape and stimulate the field (McCoy 2004). Only by altering these structurally determined rules can these resultant fields be leveled.

One common theme in our accounts was the assumption on the part of men that women are willing participants in sex-for-crack exchanges or that such exchanges are obligatory if a man is supplying money or crack. From the perspectives of women, these exchanges were viewed as neither desirable nor obligatory but were sometimes accepted as unavoidable in particular situations. Much as Wesely (2003) found in her ethnographic interviews of exotic dancers, women in crack cocaine scenes actively confront symbolic violence and seek to counter it as individuals, but by and large, they do not challenge its legitimacy, much less that of the larger social structure that enables it. Following Bourdieu’s observation that there tends to be a homology across fields of power, behavior within the crack-using field reflects broader societal fields of race, class, and gender and, to some extent, derives from them. Particular crack cocaine scenes, as in rural Ohio, must be understood as distinct and variable on a case-by-case basis. However, absent any major alterations in social and cultural fields writ large, it is unlikely that gender domination—or the dynamics of power that surround it—will disappear from specific fields of illicit drug use. Ultimately, policy must address underlying conditions that contribute to substance abuse itself as well as oppressive gender relations in the society as a whole.

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