

THE FUNNY SIDE OF DRUG DEALING: RISK, HUMOR, AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY*

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In this study, we explore the role humor plays in the narrated identities of drug dealers, in their negotiation of the threat of formal punishment, and in their cultural membership and authority. By drawing from interview and observation data gathered from 33 active drug dealers residing in St. Louis, Missouri, we find that humor facilitates identity work among illicit drug dealers in several ways. Humor is an important symbolic boundary marker distinguishing dealers from others they consider “stupid” or less circumspect. It also indicates dealers’ identities as “smart” and simultaneously establishes and validates their subcultural authority and membership in the symbolic group of “smart” dealers. Furthermore, drug dealers use denigrating humor in their narratives to distance their former and virtual identities from their present identities. Finally, humor also reduces dealers’ perceptions of the threats posed by police and potential snitches by casting dealers’ present identities and former reactions to the threat of punishment in a positive light. We conclude by discussing implications for narrative criminology, extant humor research, and current understanding of symbolic boundaries, identity work, and deterrence.

Scholars studying crime have long relied on offenders’ narratives or spoken renderings of experience (Presser, 2008: 2) as sources of information regarding the foreground, commission, and aftermath of criminal activity (see, e.g., Laub and Sampson, 2003; Shaw, 1930; Shover, 1996; Sutherland, 1937; Sutter, 1966; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918; Thrasher, 1936; Wright and Decker, 1994, 1997). The sizable body of work grounded in this tradition has for the most part been focused on treating offenders’ reports as accurate, albeit sometimes subjective, representations of the factors contributing to crime initiation, persistence, and desistance (Maruna, 2001; Presser and Sandberg, 2015). Within the past three decades, however, a small but growing number of researchers have challenged the view of offenders’ reports as simply representations of events that researchers could have witnessed had they been with narrators at the time in question (Presser, 2009: 182; Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016; see also Frank, 2010: 88). Instead, these researchers have argued that offenders’ narratives are phenomena worthy of study in and of themselves

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because of their influence on offenders' identities and the etiology and execution of crime (see, e.g., Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Horgan, 2009; Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008; Presser and Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg, 2009; Toch, 1993; Youngs and Canter, 2012). Termed "narrative criminology" (Presser, 2009), researchers in this growing field have made significant strides in exploring how offenders' narratives shape their identities and the crime decisions guided by these identities. What has received less attention, however, are the ways in which the tone of offenders' narratives may influence this process. More specifically, little is known about the role humor plays in how offenders make sense of the past, construct their identities, and direct their future crime decisions. In the present study, we fill this gap by examining the humorous narratives of a group of active illicit drug dealers residing in and around St. Louis, Missouri. By using a narrative framework, we illustrate how these dealers' use of denigrating humor in relaying their experiences with detection and apprehension by police explains their identities in relation to the risks of selling illicit drugs, demonstrates their cultural authority within drug-dealing circles, and helps situate them in the world.

NARRATIVE CRIMINOLOGY

By building on work in psychology, sociology, and sociolinguistics (see, e.g., Bruner, 1987; Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Ezzy, 1998; Frank, 2010; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1990; O'Connor, 2000; Somers, 1994), narrative criminologists recognize that human "lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative" (Polkinghorne, 1988: 160) to such an extent that it is difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to understand their experiences and identities—or an individual's sense of who he or she is (see Presser, 2008: 2)—apart from narrative forms (Bruner, 1990; Maruna, 2015; McAdams, 1996, 1998). When individuals recall the events and experiences in their lives, they do so via narratives because this temporally orders, or "sequences," these events and experiences (Cerulo, 1998; see also Labov and Waletzky, 1997; McAdams, 1990, 1993; Mead, 1938). This sequencing has a purpose. Individuals selectively organize the events, episodes, or identities in their lives with the intention of serving the "moral" or "point" of their story. This process is referred to as "emplotment" (Davis, 2000: 37; see also DeGloma, 2014; Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Frank, 2010).

Through emplotment, individuals retrospectively give meaning to what is otherwise merely a succession of events and actions (Bruner, 1987; Frank, 2010; Mattingly, 1998; McAdams, 1990, 1993; Somers, 1994). That is, they highlight some memories at the expense of others to explain to themselves and others how the events and experiences of their pasts are related to their present situations and self-identities (McAdams, 1993, 2001). Explanations of how an individual's past is related to his or her present identity can take one of two shapes. McAdams (1990) suggested that one way individuals construct their present identities is by connecting them with their past actions and identities—a process he has termed "unification." A second way that individuals can construct their present identities is by distinguishing them from their past actions and identities. Zerubavel (1998, 2003) termed this process "periodization" (see also Davis, 2000). In addition to constructing their identities through unification and periodization, individuals can also do so by establishing symbolic boundaries separating them from others whom they deem to be different on one or more dimensions (Copes, 2016; Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Zerubavel, 1998). This process helps to establish

their identities by defining who they are not (Copes, 2016; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Sandberg and Tutenges, 2015). No matter how individuals' narratives emplot their identities, this process then charts a course for their future actions (Davis, 2000; Frank, 2010).

Just as any story implicitly or explicitly suggests possible aftermaths, emplotted identities do likewise. From the narrative perspective, identities are stories, and as Davis (2000: 37) stated, a story prompts narrators and listeners to "the appropriate response, be it actions to take, attitudes to hold, or what to expect from the storyteller." Put differently, your identity not only reflects what you have done in the past but also determines what is acceptable to do in the future (Bruner, 1987; Frank, 2010; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1967; McAdams, 1985; Somers, 1994). Narratives then both construct identities *and* call on narrators to act on the basis of these identities (see Frank, 2010).

Although narratives are produced by individuals, they cannot be constructed apart from cultural influence. When constructing narratives, and thus identities, individuals can only use those resources that have been provided to them through their sociocultural positions. Even narratives that are not shared must still rely on the framework of symbols, linguistic formations, structures, vocabularies of motive, traditions, institutions, and conceptual relationships that individuals have learned through social interaction (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 211; McAdams, 1990: 180). Narratives are also shaped by their intended audiences, whether real or imaginary (McAdams, 1990). Failing to tailor the content, delivery, and plot of a narrative to the prevailing norms of its intended audience risks them deeming it inappropriate or unintelligible and inauthentic (Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler, 2011; Davis, 2000; Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Maruna, 2001).

Narratives are constitutive of culture as well (Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Polletta, 2006). Through narratives, group members collectively agree on interpretations of events and on "what counts for good and bad" and on "how to act and not to act" (Frank, 2010: 36). This occurs in a reciprocal process of social approval between storyteller and audience. When narrators share stories (and the moral codes within them), they socially approve of listeners who hold similar norms, values, and beliefs. Likewise, when listeners hear these stories and consider them acceptable, they socially approve of their content and thus their narrators. This mutual approval provides narrators and listeners with a sense of group identity (see Davis, 2002; Frank, 2010; Polletta, 2006). Narrators and listeners alike then act so as to guide their behavior in accordance with their mutually approved narratives, lest they perceive themselves or be perceived by others as outsiders (Presser, 2013).

Narratives thus provide a vehicle by which individuals can express their cultural authority. As we use it here, cultural authority refers to an individual's expressed understanding and possession of cultural capital—that is, the collection of symbolic elements defining a particular group, such as its style of dress, mannerisms, skills, tastes, credentials, and so on (see Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). In addition, cultural authority also refers to an individual's understanding of the symbolic boundaries, or conceptual distinctions, separating his or her group from others (see Barth, 1998; Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

Criminologists using narrative analysis have contributed a significant body of work, in which they illustrate how offenders' narratives explain and construct their deviant or prosocial identities and assert their cultural authority (see, e.g., Brookman, 2015; Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler, 2011; Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008, 2009, 2012; Sandberg, 2009, 2010; Ugelvik, 2015); few,

however, have explored how the ways in which narratives are delivered may play a role in these processes (but see O'Connor, 2015). Exploration of the way offenders tell stories is important for two reasons. First, the manner in which a story is told can influence the audience's perception of its content. The tone of a narrative can indicate what is salient within it to the audience and thus what is important to the speaker (O'Connor, 2000, 2015). Second, and related to the first point, by indicating what is important to a narrator, the tone of a story also reflects "what his or her identity is all about" (McAdams, 1996: 308) and thus helps define the situation for both narrator and audience (see, generally, Goffman, 1959, 1981). In the present study, we investigate how the denigrating humor in offenders' narratives influences their identity work. We focus on humor because the results of extant research outside of criminology have long demonstrated that humor is a key mechanism by which individuals express their understanding of events and their identities in relation to others (see, e.g., Fine, 1983; Martin and Lefcourt, 1983; Morreall, 1983).

HUMOR

Humor is defined as the verbal statements and other actions made by an individual with the intention of inciting pleasurable or mirthful cognitive-perceptual, emotional, and physiological responses in the individual or others. It refers to these responses as well (Lefcourt, 2001; see also Billig, 2005; Chapman, 1983; Cooper, 2005; Long and Graesser, 1988; Martin, 2003; Meyer, 2000; Wyer and Collins, 1992). Humor thus includes verbal devices such as joking, wisecracks, sarcasm, and irony (Clift, 1999; Morreall, 1994) and physical expressions such as quick exhalations of breath, raising eyebrows, laughter, and smiling (Clift, 1999; Meyer, 2000; Pomerantz, 1984). Although individuals can certainly experience humor when alone, it is primarily a phenomenon that occurs between social interactants (Lefcourt, 2001).

Scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology, communication and linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, have highlighted several key functions of humor. First, individuals experiencing or undertaking stressful, risk-filled, or uncertain circumstances often relieve the anxiety and other negative emotions stemming from these circumstances with humor (Berk et al., 1988; Dixon, 1980; Haig, 1986; Lefcourt, 2001; Moran and Massam, 1997; Morreall, 1983). This function has been attributed to the ways in which humor reframes or reinterprets individuals' understanding of past and present circumstances (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983; Meyer, 2000; Parkhill et al., 2011; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988; Sanders, 2004; Vivona, 2014). Second, individuals use humor to express superiority over others (Glasgow, 1997; Morreall, 1983; Sanders, 2004; Zillman and Cantor, 1976) and their past selves (Hobbes, 1968 [1651]: 46; Morreall, 1983; Rapp, 1951; Zillman, 1983). When used in this way, humor perceptually distinguishes individuals from those they are disparaging (Zillman and Cantor, 1976), reduces any perceived threats posed by these others (Dixon, 1980), and demonstrates the individuals' cultural authority (see, generally, Fine, 1983).

When individuals use humor in these ways, they are making pointed attempts to establish social connections with others (Coser, 1959; Morreall, 1994; Stephenson, 1951). If an individual's audience responds favorably to his or her humor, this can indicate that the audience understands the tacit or implicit content of the individual's communication, that it shares a similar viewpoint, and perhaps most importantly, that it recognizes and

approves of the identity the individual has attempted to express (Chapman, 1983; Fine, 1983; Katz, 1999). This acceptance can then establish or bolster feelings of group unity between the audience and the individual. Humor's utility for establishing and maintaining social connections does not end there. A unique aspect of humor is that an individual can also use it to *test* whether the audience understands his or her communication, shares the same viewpoint, and approves of his or her identity without fear of incurring social repercussions and damaging group unity if this is not the case. If the audience meets the humor with social disapproval, the individual can avoid repercussions, thereby maintaining group membership, by stating that the humor was "just a joke" and thus not meant to be reflective of his or her viewpoint or true identity (Zillman, 1983). For these reasons, humor is a tool commonly used by individuals to express their self-identities when interacting with others.

In what follows, we explore how these functions of humor are accomplished in narratives and thereby assist in constructing drug dealers' storied identities, their perceptions of the threat of formal punishment, and their cultural membership and authority. In doing so, we add to current understandings of the work narratives do for offenders and of the influence of a certain style of humor in these narratives. We also make suggestions for how these humorous narratives contribute to offenders' persistence in illicit activity despite the risks of formal punishment.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for the present study were collected through systematic observations of, and semistructured interviews with, 33 individuals involved in distributing illicit drugs in and around the St. Louis, Missouri, metropolitan area. All dealers were either actively selling illicit drugs at the time of the interview or had quit doing so sometime in the year prior. The dealers sold a wide range of drugs, including, but not limited to, cocaine, crack-cocaine, crystal methamphetamine (meth), DMT, hallucinogenic mushrooms, heroin, ketamine, LSD (acid), marijuana, MDA (sassafras), MDMA (ecstasy, molly), nitrous oxide, and various pharmaceuticals. All dealers reported using the substances they sold. Most of them distributed at the retail level to end-users, but some (10) acted as suppliers and sold larger amounts intended to be repackaged and redistributed by others. The sample also includes one grower of hallucinogenic mushrooms and one meth "cook." By and large, these dealers operated within "closed" drug markets or markets wherein dealers will only sell to those they know and trust (see May and Hough, 2001: 139), but some (8) also peddled their wares in semi-open markets. Contrary to closed markets, illicit dealers operating in semi-open markets will sell to strangers as long as they look the part (May and Hough, 2004: 553). All dealers but one had been selling for a year or longer.

The dealers ranged from 19 to 41 years of age with a mean of 29 years. Most were male (29) with only four women. Twenty-seven informants were White, three were African American, two were Latino, and one was Chinese American. Three of them had dropped out of high school, four had obtained General Educational Development (GED) degrees, and six received high-school diplomas. Of the informants who pursued education beyond high school, 16 had attended some college, were currently enrolled, or had graduated with Bachelor's degrees. Twenty-nine informants were legally employed at the time of data collection. Only five informants reported incarceration for drug-related charges. Less than half of the sample, 15 informants, claimed to have been arrested and convicted

but not incarcerated for drug charges, whereas 3 informants reported serving time for nondrug-related charges and 10 reported having evaded arrest altogether.

We located and recruited informants with use of a snowball sampling design that was initiated through purposive sampling (cf. Jacques and Wright, 2008). The initial informants and contacts forming the basis of our snowball sample were located and recruited by the lead author through social connections established via education and employment. More specifically, the lead author became acquainted with or learned of individuals involved in illicit drug distribution at his school or place of employment and then approached these individuals and requested that they participate in the study. Recruitment and data collection ran concurrently from winter 2012 until the following fall. The interviews were conducted by the lead author and ranged in length from 33 minutes to 104 minutes, with a mean length of 56 minutes. In conducting the interviews, the lead author used a semistructured interview schedule. This approach permitted him to conduct the interviews in a conversational manner and address topics of interest as they arose instead of posing the same questions in the same order to all informants. As a result, the informants could introduce novel concepts outside of those included in the interview schedule and provide tangential examples and narratives. Therefore, the shape of each informant's interview was distinctly contoured. In other words, no interview followed the same path; nevertheless, every interview contained instances of humor and risk that shaped the themes guiding the present article.

Interview data were supplemented with information collected during 43 hours of systematic observations of seven informants and their co-offenders and associates. Observations were conducted with the permission of these informants but were purposively hidden from any others present. The lead author documented the events and interactions between subjects occurring during the observations by surreptitiously jotting down fieldnotes. Moreover, because many interviews were conducted in informal venues, such as taverns, local parks, and residences of informants, this provided space and time to observe the other 26 dealers informally before and after their interviews. Such locations also allowed for observations of the interactions between three informants and their friends who accompanied them to the interviews.

The informants' use of humor was not openly prompted or encouraged by direct questions or probes during the interview or observation sessions. Although two dealers were asked whether they "joked around a lot," this was a closing question and therefore did not influence the dealers' use of humor in their narratives. In addition to documenting humorous content (i.e., witticisms and jokes) in the dealers' statements during the interviews and their interactions with associates, the lead author also recorded any facial expressions, laughter, body language, and styles of delivery (e.g., vocal pitch or speed of utterance) indicating intentional or unintentional humor.

As the broader project informing the present study was centered on exploring various dimensions of drug dealers' experiences with risk (e.g., how they manage conflict and how they avoid punishment), much of the interview data referred to these aspects of the dealers' lives. Moreover, throughout the observation sessions, the dealers and their co-offenders continually returned to the topic of how they managed the risk of formal punishment without prompting from the lead author. For these reasons, we focused on exploring the relationship between the dealers' humorous narratives and their experiences with risk.

It should be noted that the lead author had preexisting relationships with eight informants and shared numerous sociodemographic characteristics with them (e.g., race, age, post-high-school education, and place of residence). It is possible that these relationships may have altered these dealers' use of humor throughout their interviews and among those that were observed in natural settings. On analysis, however, the thematic categories pulled from this group of dealers were not different from those drawn from the data collected from the remaining informants. More specifically, no thematic category was discovered in their interview and observation data that was not also discovered in the interview and observation data taken from the other informants. Similarly, the thematic categories drawn from the observation data did not differ from those taken from the interview sessions.

The lead author began data analysis by first comparing the content of the dealers' humorous narratives within and across the interview transcriptions and observation fieldnotes. Here we defined "narrative" as an informant's spoken rendition of a particular experience; hence, each interview contained many different narratives. After this first step, the lead author then grouped similar content into broad, general categories (e.g., narratives about police and narratives about careless associates). The individual narratives forming each of these categories were then sorted into smaller, more narrowly defined categories on the basis of their similar or dissimilar characteristics (e.g., narratives about undercover officers and narratives about being arrested by police; see Spradley, 1979: 173–84). He then carefully examined the tone, imagery (see McAdams, 1996, for discussion of these aspects of narratives), and linguistic mechanisms, such as frame breaks, meta-talk, noun and pronoun use, and deflecting phrases (see O'Connor, 2000, for a full description of these mechanisms and the analysis thereof), within each narrative in these categories for indications of their meaning for the dealers and their associates. During this case-by-case analysis, emerging examples of overarching or universal themes concerning the dealers' humorous narratives of risk were compared and contrasted with subsequent cases in the sample (see Maruna, 2001: 51). Themes that were not supported or were countered by subsequent cases were then reexamined and either refined or discarded. The findings discussed in the next section represent the thematic categories that were not discarded and were most prevalent across the interview and observational data.

FINDINGS

The use of denigrating humor in these dealers' narratives of their experiences with the risk of formal punishment facilitated their identity work in two primary ways. First, the dealers' humorous narratives symbolically distinguished them from "being stupid" by constructing their present identities as "being smart." Second, these narratives also symbolically reduced their perceptions of the threats posed by others, particularly police and individuals threatening to act as police informants.

BEING STUPID AND BEING SMART

OTHER DEALERS

The dealers' narratives were rife with instances wherein they symbolically distinguished themselves from others who were "stupid" or, in other words, from individuals who committed actions that either did or potentially could have drawn police attention. Many

dealers performed this identity work by humorously deriding others who had “gotten busted” or arrested by police. For instance, James¹ laughed when describing a former customer who had been arrested after a traffic stop as “fucking stupid” for “keeping [a quarter-pound of marijuana] in his car, the whole quantity [shakes head in disbelief]!, and driving around with it ... cuz he didn’t want to keep it in his parents’ house.” John similarly described an associate as a “fucking idiot” for failing to return to court after being released on bond for possession of “a little bit of coke [cocaine].” As a result, police raided the associate’s residence and arrested him for possession and intent to distribute “a bunch of coke and shit.” Likewise, in discussing how people get arrested, Mud, a White, 30-year-old, heroin dealer, told a story about a “dumb-ass” heroin dealer he “stopped going to ... about 3 months ago” after the dealer’s arrest:

He’d have me coming into ... neighborhoods ... that were all Black ..., and he was ... Black ... too. The cops in [that neighborhood] are relentless and ... they pay attention to this shit. If they see a White person leaving and they don’t look like they have any business there, they’re getting pulled over and they’re gonna get searched [raises eyebrows, shakes head]. ... [He] would have me come over to his apartment ... he’d come out and ... give me the shit and he would just sit there and ramble on and on and on about stupid nonsense and stuff. ... [I]t should’ve been I come in, I get it, I get out, ... that’s best for me and him ..., to ... do [it] as quickly as ... possible. ... I mean he’s just stupid [chuckles]. He would have people come up to a gas station to meet him, and he would have everybody pull up to the pumps to the point where ... each one of the pumps would be taken up ... and he’s ... [raises volume and pitch] inside chatting away with the employees!²

James and B, another informant, regarded Bugs, a third informant who worked at the same restaurant, in the same way. Each told similar stories wherein they laughed at Bugs’s stupidity at bringing a bag of marijuana to their mutual workplace and selling it to a fellow employee in full view of a manager. Although police were not notified of the incident, Bugs and his customer were fired.

The dealers’ narratives also distanced them from others who had not been arrested but whose careless behavior was thought likely to soon draw police attention. Wyatt, a White, 32-year-old, marijuana dealer, described one of his suppliers and co-worker in such a way:

Mr. Chatterbox, I go over there, man, and he’s got four other people waiting on him. Then he talks and ... wants to tell you about the weed and about how this one’s so beautiful and this one tastes so good [raises volume], and I don’t give a shit! You know, I’ve been here for 20 minutes, now there’s four other people here. ... You know, that makes me uncomfortable, like I want it to be over and done with, I want my transactions quick. ... I don’t like dealing with people that don’t make quick transactions. ... Another reason I don’t like messing with him it’s like he’ll deal with everyone and anyone. ... When he first started there [at the restaurant], within 2 weeks everyone in the fucking place knew he sold. And I was like, “What are you

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1. Informant names are pseudonyms randomly selected by the researcher or are “street” names provided by the informants.
 2. Throughout the article, ellipses represent words or phrases that have been omitted for the sake of clarity.

doin? Why are you telling everybody this?” [begins mocking him with a deep pitch and slow delivery], ‘Uh yeah, I want to get rid of it.’ ... That’s not who I am. ... I’m the complete opposite. I want no one to know that I sell it!

The denigrating humor in these narratives plays an important role in constructing the dealers’ identities by shaping symbolic boundaries between them and those they consider to be “stupid” or less circumspect. It does so by positioning the dealers’ identities as distinct from those of careless dealers. O’Connor (2000: 3) defined positioning as a “way for speakers to configure themselves and others in the statements they make and the stories they tell.” By humorously denigrating and mocking others who behaved uncircumspectly, the dealers position their identities as superior and thus different from these others and thereby construct symbolic boundaries separating themselves from the symbolic group of “stupid” dealers (see, generally, Zillman, 1983). This process resembles that occurring when drug users and dealers distinguish themselves from other individuals who use or deal drugs considered less morally acceptable (e.g., marijuana vs. crystal methamphetamine) or when drug users differentiate themselves from other users with less desirable characteristics (e.g., hustler vs. crackhead; see Copes, 2016; Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Marsh, Copes, and Linnemann, 2017).

The dealers’ symbolic separation of themselves from other uncircumspect dealers was also indicated by depersonalized references to these dealers within their narratives of “being stupid.” After mentions of specific others committing careless actions, some dealers then symbolically grouped these individuals into an outgroup of “stupid dealers” through the use of collective pronouns such as “people” and “they.” For instance, in Wyatt’s earlier comment, he first provides a specific example of an individual (i.e., “Mr. Chatterbox”) behaving carelessly. He then later refers to this individual as one of the “*people* that don’t make quick transactions.” In addition, after several subsequent questions, Wyatt then again referenced his earlier comment about this individual in stating that he would “stop ... dealing with *people* ... that are just putting it out there like they’re the guy. Call me, like, I’m the guy, I’m the dope guy. Like okay, if you’re that guy, okay, I’m not dealing with you.”

Other dealers did not provide specific examples of others committing risky actions but instead indicated their symbolic separation from “stupid” dealers by using collective pronouns to refer to combined information from various past and imagined episodes (see McAdams, 2001: 108, on “general event clusters”). For instance, when referring to customers committing what he considered to be unsafe behavior when arranging drug transactions, John said, “Don’t text me, I fucking hate that. I’ve had *people* do that before, they’ll text me [begins deep, slow mocking voice], ‘Hey man, can I get a fucking half-pound?’ Who’s this? [laughs] You got the wrong number!”

When conceptually separating themselves from “stupid dealers” in these ways, Wyatt and the other dealers conceptually “flatten” (Presser, 2013) the identities of these dealers. Rather than considering the unique characteristics of “stupid” dealers and the specific details of their actions, the dealers instead uniformly consider them as lacking variability or as “undifferentiated items in a unified social category” (Tajfel, 1981: 243). Put differently, by placing careless dealers in this symbolic group, the dealers then identified them solely on the basis of this membership (i.e., as “stupid”) and not by any other distinctive characteristics. By using humor and collective pronouns to construct this symbolic boundary, and thus flatten the identities of “stupid” dealers and obscure any

similarities they shared with them, the dealers further encouraged their humorous derision of these others. This in turn reciprocally reinforced the dealers' construction of the symbolic boundary and their placement of "stupid" dealers into the outgroup (see, generally, Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990; Fine, 1983; Noel, Wann, and Branscombe, 1995; Tajfel, 1982).

In addition to establishing symbolic boundaries separating the dealers from others who were stupid, the humor within their narratives of risk also validated and asserted their subcultural authority as to what is "stupid" and, conversely, as to what is "smart" among illicit drug dealers. By drawing on the work of Bourdieu (see, e.g., 1977, 1990), Thornton (1996) argued that subgroups of a society's population can develop their own "subspecies" of cultural capital by which they can demonstrate their group membership and status (see also Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009, on "street capital"). For instance, she argued that among British clubbers in the 1990s, an important source of subcultural capital was "hipness," which was defined as a collection of traits including fashionable dress, cool and detached demeanor, the ability to dance, and an understanding of current club music trends. One of the most important aspects of subcultural capital among the dealers interviewed for the present study was one's ability to outwit police and avoid formal punishment. If a dealer refrained from committing any actions, such as being explicit when communicating about illicit drugs, bringing strangers to drug deals, freely sharing information about their dealing to anyone, and of course being arrested by police, that either did or were thought to lead to formal punishment, he or she was thought by other dealers to hold some degree of this subcultural capital. To demonstrate their possession of this subcultural capital, and their subcultural authority on what this capital consisted of in their respective drug-dealing circles, the dealers humorously denigrated dealers who behaved indiscreetly. This function of ridicule is particularly useful for dealers because it allows them to claim subcultural authority without having to provide concrete demonstrations of their circumspect behavior.

A second way the dealers' narratives indicated their assertion of subcultural authority was through the use of the second-person pronoun "you" and phrases including it, such as "you know," "you know what I mean," and "you know what I'm saying." When used by itself, "you" is an inclusive linguistic device that refers to the speaker, the addressee, and the generalized other (see O'Connor, 2000: 75). "You know" and its variants are devices used by narrators to validate that listeners agree with their message and to assert their certainty that they do (Holmes, 1986: 7).³ Consider this response from Perry, a White, 35-year-old, marijuana supplier, to a question as to whether dealers that are detected by police and arrested are different from those that are not:

Yes, cuz they're dumb, cuz they're lazy, they get to the point to where they just sit there and everybody comes to them and eventually you have a house full of nice stuff but you're never leaving the house on a regular basis and people are constantly coming by here. It doesn't matter where you live, someone's gonna take notice of that shit. And in my experience, those are the folks that just sign themselves up man. They

3. Although speakers sometimes use these phrases as buffers between utterances, we regard the examples used in the present analysis as more meaningful because they were often said as questions or were accompanied by nonverbal gestures (e.g., prolonged eye contact and raised eyebrows) indicating that the speaker was awaiting a confirmatory response from his or her audience.

get their door kicked in, they're sitting there playing fucking PlayStation, smoking bong hits, and just selling weed man [laughs]. That's how I think, if you're a dummy, you can't fix dumb dude [chuckles], you know? Mail yourself a fucking package from a different state, go to the post office and pick it up, you know what I mean, people do dumb shit, you know? You can't set yourself up for fucking failure, dude, nobody does it on purpose, but it seems like the dummies get caught, dude.

Here the use of humor by Perry in his narrative indicates his identification of dealers who are unemployed and sell out of their personal residences as uncircumspect or "stupid." This humor, along with his inclusion of collective nouns and pronouns (i.e., "they're" and "people"), implies Perry's symbolic grouping of those who commit stupid actions into a unified social outgroup. His use of "you" as in "eventually *you* have a house full of nice stuff" indicates that he, and other "smart" dealers, understand that one cannot sell illicit drugs in this way for long and successfully avoid punishment. Thus, Perry subtly suggests that he not only identifies himself as a drug dealer but also as one who possesses subcultural capital. Finally, when using the terms "you know" and "you know what I mean" along with humor, Perry is attempting to connect with his audience and implicitly ask it to validate his understanding of uncircumspect behavior and to recognize his subcultural authority.

When the illicit drug dealers interviewed offered narratives of other dealers behaving carelessly and possibly or actually being detected by police as a result, they constructed identities counter to them. They did so by using denigrating humor to form symbolic boundaries distinguishing their identities as distinct from those held by these other uncircumspect dealers. In doing so, the dealers also demonstrated their subcultural authority on what is valued within the culture of illicit drug dealing—namely, the ability to avoid arrest. Through these two methods, the dealers constructed narrative identities wherein they viewed themselves as unlikely to be detected or arrested by police. In other words, by telling what they considered funny stories about others being arrested or coming close to it, the dealers positioned themselves as unlike these others and thus unlikely to commit actions that could lead to their arrests.

By using humor to construct these boundaries and demonstrate their authority instead of using other forms of communication, such as insulting someone in an angry or frustrated manner, the dealers are taking a step to connect with their audiences beyond that afforded by simply sharing stories. With humor, dealers ensure that their audiences agree with them (Dresser, 1967; Fine, 1983) and recognize their projected identities (Chapman, 1983; Katz, 1999). Moreover, in using humor, dealers can be malicious while avoiding both anticipated and actual reprimand from others that may not agree with them *and* reprimand from themselves. In this way, the use of humor permits the dealers to avoid incorporating negative treatment of others as a characteristic of their self-identities and thus allows them to construct and retain positive self-images.

PAST IDENTITIES AND ACTIONS

The dealers also constructed their present identities through narratives in which they mocked and ridiculed themselves for "being stupid." Dean, a White, 32-year-old, marijuana dealer, for example, looked back on his younger, more cavalier days with humorous disbelief:

In high school I did some dumb shit, you know, driving down the highway ripping a bong, you know, while I'm driving and like [speaking while laughing], you know somebody looks over and sees that shit, you know what I mean? ... I still lived at home with my parents at that time so I would sit in my closet and weigh out a ton of baggies, you know, and carry 'em around, what we called nickels and dimes back then, boom-boom-boom. The dumbest thing was, is that I was so scared to get caught by my parents that I would drive around with all the shit in my car all the time [laughing], you know, now I look at it, back on it, I'm like oh my god you were so lucky you never fucking got caught! [smiles and continues laughing] I mean you're driving around with two to three ounces of weed in your car at any given point in time and a bong!

Brian, a White, 31-year-old, ecstasy, and marijuana dealer also mocked himself for smoking marijuana while driving but, unlike Dean, he was arrested as a result:

I just got off work and I had eight individual eighths [bags of marijuana weighing 3.5 grams] ... all individually wrapped cuz I was getting ready to sell. ... And I was an idiot. ... I was smoking weed [laughs]. ... I went through a sobriety check. ... As soon as the [police officer] walks up to the truck, he's like, "You having a good night?" and I'm like, "Well, not now" [laughs].

Gregory, a White, 32-year-old, marijuana dealer, shared a similar narrative with our lead author (TD), but unlike Brian, he purposively blundered into the hands of police:

Gregory: Crazy story ... I had a warrant for a speeding ticket ... I wanted to go pay. I stopped by [local headshop], bought a little ten dollar piece [pipe], smoked ... a little bit of weed. ... I walk in, "Hey I'm here to pay ... a ticket. I have a warrant." "Oh, you have a warrant? What's your name?" Gave 'em my name. "Okay, yeah, just wait right here." Cop comes out, "Gregory -----, you have a warrant, you're arrested." Click-click [pantomimes putting handcuffs on, shakes head while laughing]. Had the pipe in my pocket the whole time, I had no clue [deeply exhales, smiles, laughs softly]. He takes me downstairs, searches me, "Oh, what's this?" "It's a weed pipe, sorry, charge me with it."

TD: Did you tell anybody about it?

Gregory: No, I felt pretty embarrassed. ... Who walks into a police station with a pipe in their hand?

TD: So you weren't worried about other people thinking that you were narcing [acting as a police informant], you were just embarrassed about it?

Gregory: Yeah, more embarrassed about it. Who walks in the police station with, you know, a glass pipe in their pocket? [chuckles]

By jocularly deriding their actions in these narratives, the dealers indicate that the former selves responsible for these actions are worthy of this humorous derision and are therefore distinct from their present, superior identities. Put differently, through this humor, the dealers positioned their present identities as "smart" or as unlikely to commit actions

that may lead to arrest and, thus, symbolically different from the uncircumspect persons they used to be. The dealers' use of humor performed this identity work by facilitating the periodization of their identities.

Through periodization, persons "split" temporally contiguous events, such as the present millennium and the past one, into perceptually distinct time periods and thereby create 'historical discontinuity' between them (Zerubavel, 2003: 8). Here the dealers do likewise. To an outside observer, many dealers' experiences of "being stupid" occurred temporally close to the time of data collection and may thus be difficult to separate conceptually as distinct time periods. But the dealers' humorous stories indicate that they have constructed understandings of these experiences as occurring during different time periods and, hence, as belonging to different identities. Gregory's final statement "who walks into a police station with a glass pipe in their pocket?" illustrates this periodization. His use of the pronouns "who" and "their," both denoting nonspecific others in this context, as well as the ridicule inherent in the statement itself, indicate to himself and listeners that the person who got busted in this way is not him, at least "him" in terms of his present identity.

Many other dealers also bolstered their humorous construction of this historical discontinuity with excuses for their past behavior. Through excuses, individuals admit the wrongfulness of their behavior but deny responsibility for it (Scott and Lyman, 1968). This method allows them to demonstrate their alignment with the social order and avoid potential negative consequences for violating it. These dealers' excuses for being detected and arrested typically centered on being intoxicated at the time of detection and arrest. For instance, V, a White, 28-year-old, cocaine, ecstasy (MDMA), heroin, marijuana, and meth (crystal methamphetamine) supplier, blamed one of his arrests for drug distribution on being high at the time:

I caught a case for it [selling meth]. I was high [chuckles] and did some stupid shit. I was at a Wal-Mart. ... this guy I was with stole some shit [and] I had a fucking half-ounce in my car. I always told myself I would never catch a fucking meth case for selling it, but goddamn it I fucking did. ... It was retarded, man [shakes head in disbelief].

The humorous derision in this statement indicates that V recognizes his past behavior as stupid and distinguishes his present identity from it, suggesting his awareness of the subcultural mandate among illicit drug dealers regarding the need to "be smart." His awareness is further suggested by his excuse—that he was uncircumspect because he "was high." This excuse demonstrates his subcultural authority because it implies that he is aware that smart dealers do not commit careless behavior and that he disapproves of his former risky actions. Furthermore, with this humorous excuse, V requests that his audience recognize his present identity as he wishes it to be viewed and disassociate it from his former actions. Thus, the dealers' excuses are another facet of the identity work occurring within their narratives, along with their humor, that suggests to themselves and others that their former "stupid" behavior is not indicative of who they are at present.

The dealers further reinforced the distinction between their past and present identities by emphasizing that their current identities were "smart." This was sometimes accomplished through the dealers making outright statements in which they identified themselves as such. For instance, after the excerpt provided earlier wherein he denigrated the

“dumb shit” he did in high school, Dean was quick to point out that he “got smarter, much smarter about that in college.” Similarly, Gus stated that, over time, “I learned, so I’m a smart person hopefully.” Direct statements such as these, however, were uncommon. It was far more common for the dealers to emphasize their present “smart” identities by caustically speaking of themselves performing imaginary “stupid” actions. Jack mocked a vision of himself “hooking up” an unknown friend of a customer by sarcastically portraying himself in the scenario. “I’m sorry, I don’t mess with faces I don’t know. I’m not gonna meet up with your buddy. [Lowers pitch, slows delivery, raises eyebrows], “Aw yeah, give me a call, I’ll meet up with him [shakes head].” Burt did the same when envisioning himself selling drugs to complete strangers. “I’m not gonna go stand on the bus line and be like [raises pitch], ‘Hey, do you need this? Do you need that?’ That’s ... an easier way to get caught up.” Jared, a White, 30-year-old, crystal methamphetamine “cook” and small-time heroin dealer, did likewise when speaking of selling drugs to recently arrested associates:

If you call me on the same day after you just got caught with two pounds of fucking weed, and I don’t think twice about it and go meet up with you and sell you five more ... and the cops are waiting on me when I get there? That’s my own stupidity. That’s my own dumb-ass ... fault.

Bugs, a White, male, 33-year-old, DMT, ecstasy, and marijuana supplier, and Snap, a White, female, 28-year-old, ice (high-quality crystal methamphetamine), LSD, marijuana, molly (MDMA), nitrous oxide, and sassafras (MDA) supplier, laughed uproariously at the thought of selling to “stupid” customers at raves:

TD: What do you not want people to do during transactions?

Snap: Say the drug by its correct name, offer me more money. ... Be high, I don’t want ’em to be high while their getting my drugs [laughs], you know?

Bugs: Or ... as long as the high person comes to you not with like a fistful of dollars, you know? [laughs]

Snap: [continues laughing] Right!

Bugs: [lowers pitch, slows delivery, pantomimes movements of intoxicated person holding out money] Can I have some more?

Snap: [laughs]

Bugs: Um, no! [laughs]

The humor in these narratives does not construct the dealers’ identities as “smart” by contrasting them with their past identities or with “stupid” others but instead with virtual selves committing “stupid” actions. Although the dealers’ point of comparison has changed, their symbolic boundary construction, and humor’s function within it, remain the same. Their mockery highlights that the dealers do not consider themselves likely to commit uncircumspect actions and demonstrates their subcultural authority on “being

smart” and “being stupid.” Moreover, their use of humor is also an attempt to establish that their listeners regard them similarly. In essence, here the dealers construct “smart” identities by emphasizing that it is ludicrous for them and others to imagine themselves putting themselves at risk with careless behavior.

In humorously derogating “stupid” behavior, whether that of others or that of actual or virtual selves, these illicit drug dealers position themselves as members of the symbolic group of dealers who are “smart” enough to avoid detection and arrest by police. Their humor, along with their use of linguistic mechanisms such as “you know” and more complex verbal devices such as excuses, allows drug dealers to distance themselves from uncircumspect others and from the “stupid” identities implied by their former actions. With these humorous narratives, dealers also assert their subcultural authority regarding what constitutes unacceptable, or careless, behavior within the cultural world of illicit drug dealers. Finally, through the use of humor, and their narratives more broadly, the dealers attempt to connect with their listeners and ascertain whether these listeners recognize and approve of their subcultural authority and their narrative identities.

REDUCING PERCEIVED THREATS

The results of extant humor research have demonstrated that persons experiencing the same threatening circumstances, such as Nazi occupation (Obrdlik, 1942) or living in close proximity to nuclear facilities (Parkhill et al., 2011), share humorous stories with each other about their mutual dilemmas. In doing so, they can alter their views of these circumstances such that they become less threatening and more manageable. The dealers and their associates behaved similarly by sharing stories about the predominant threat they mutually faced—the possibility of formal punishment. The use of humor in their narratives of such threats performed identity work for them by reducing their perceptions of this threat in three ways. It discounted their understanding of the willingness and capacity of “obvious,” “crooked,” and “impotent” police officers to detect and punish them; classified potential “snitches” as nonthreatening; and positively framed the dealers’ identities in relation to their past and current experiences with this threat.

OBVIOUS, CROOKED, AND IMPOTENT POLICE OFFICERS

The dealers often mocked or humorously denigrated police efforts to identify them. These narratives ridiculed the inappropriate dress, comportment, and speech of individuals presumed to be undercover police officers. The following quote from John, a White, 34-year-old, psychedelic mushroom grower and supplier, exemplifies the dealers’ funny stories about their encounters with the fumbling efforts of “obvious cops” (see also Bourgois, 2003: 111 on “obvious cops”):

Really it’s funny because the typical undercover cop that you get at a festival is not like a typical undercover cop you would see . . . in a movie or something that’s busting coke dealers, you know, somebody who looks the part and who’s actually part of the culture and shit [chuckles]. . . . It’s very obvious that they’re . . . a cop with a fucking disguise on, you know what I mean? . . . [It’s] not only their appearance but the way they carry themselves and the way they talk and shit. For instance, one time I had this guy come up to me . . . and for a minute he looked like maybe kind of like an emo-type dude, he’s got . . . some tight black jeans on, black tee-shirt, fuckin like

little army hat on or whatever ... he approached me and was like, "Hey man, are you holding?" [laughs] First off, nobody says that. This is not nineteen-fucking-sixty nine! We're not Cheech and Chong here ... nobody says that! [laughs heartily] ... Just for the curiosity, I turned around and I was like, "Hey man, holding what?" And ... he got ... all happy and he fucking [came] over and he was like, "What you got man?" and I was like, "What are you looking for, man?" And he goes, "Oh, LSD, mushrooms, methamphetamines, uppers, downers," and I was like, "You're alright dude!" [laughs]. Nobody talks like that. Like, dude, nobody talks like that! ... It [was] hilarious ... [he'd] obviously never seen or done any of those drugs ever.

The humor in the dealers' narratives of "obvious cops" acts as a positioning mechanism for the dealers' present identities. The humorous expression of their superiority over police positions them as smarter than police to themselves and interlocutors. By sharing these stories with others, the dealers construct these superior identities, and through their use of humor and of second-person pronouns and their associated phrases (e.g., "you know"), they seek approval of them from their listeners. Furthermore, through their use of these second-person pronouns and their use of indefinite pronouns, as in John's statements "*we're* not Cheech and Chong here" and "*nobody* says that," the dealers deride police while indicating their subcultural authority on what is acceptable behavior among "smart" users and dealers and symbolically denote their membership in this group.

The dealers also told what they considered to be humorous stories about police corruption. In referring to the possibility of police finding illicit drugs in his vehicle after a traffic stop, Ted stressed that there are a "lotta crooked cops out there. Nine out of ten times you're gonna get pulled over by a cop that smokes weed anyways. He's just gonna take it home." Like Ted, none of the dealers had first-hand experience with "crooked cops." Nevertheless, this did not stop them from sharing secondhand experiences. For instance, during an observation at Bugs's residence, a young drug buyer entertained several other dealers and users with a humorous story about one of his "old dealers." He claimed the dealer had been "flagged" (pulled over by police in traffic) for drinking and driving with a quarter-pound of marijuana portioned into individual units intended for resale. Amidst a chorus of derisive snorts and laughter from the listeners present, the storyteller claimed that after police searched the car and found the drugs, they took the dealer to the station, did not fingerprint him, and released him without further avail. The others in the room then followed his story with various stories they had "heard" about "crooked cops" "smoking weed" or "taking [marijuana infused] brownies off of kids and eating them."

The sharing of secondhand stories such as these is an important way that the dealers' establish their subcultural membership and authority. These stories perform this function in two ways. First, when sharing these stories, dealers demonstrate their understanding that, in the subculture of illicit drug dealing, police are considered an outgroup and thus symbolically different from drug dealers. This, along with the dealers' humorous denigration of police, indicates their subcultural authority regarding how drug dealers "should" view police. Second, dealers demonstrate their cultural membership with these stories by simply knowing of them in the first place. By being aware of these stories and sharing them, dealers show that they are socially connected to other members of the drug-dealing subculture. These implied connections then suggest the dealers' subcultural membership to listeners.

The apparent impotence of police at enforcing punishment also featured in many of the dealers' stories. In these stories, the dealers laughed at the seeming unwillingness or inability of police to follow through with punishing individuals caught with illicit drugs. Bugs shared one such story to a roomful of users and dealers during an observation period at his residence. As the story went, Bugs was smoking marijuana in an alley in Chicago during a lunch break when two uniformed police officers encountered him. Rather than arresting him on the spot, the officers instead asked him what kind of job he had that he thought he could get high on his lunch break. He replied that he answered phone calls about DJ gear. He then set the room rolling with laughter by claiming that the police officers started laughing and said, "that was a job you could definitely do while stoned."

The dealers' humorous narratives about crooked and impotent police officers perform important identity work for the dealers. Like the dealers' narratives of "obvious cops," these narratives explain the narrators' identities as unafraid of the threat posed by police. Here, however, the dealers explain themselves as unafraid of police capacity to enforce punishment rather than their capacity for detection. The effect on the dealers' identities, however, is the same. When mocking police abilities to punish them, dealers also construct identities that are less fearful of the likelihood of formal punishment. This is then culturally reinforced by others in their group laughing at the same stories and sharing their own, which indicates to dealers that these others both approve of the dealers' viewpoints and hold similar attitudes regarding the threat posed by police.

This function of humor bears conceptual resemblance to the function of narratives more broadly in what Presser (2013) termed "reducing the target." Presser defined this as a process by which various individuals who harm others use linguistic tactics within their narratives to "obscure . . . the array of unique interests and experiences of" these others (p. 111; see also Tajfel, 1981, 1982). One way this facilitates the infliction of harm is by flattening the identification of large groups of individuals such that they are considered merely as adversaries and not as distinct individuals with distinct characteristics. Drug dealers' stories of "obvious," "crooked," and "impotent" police officers also reduce their subjects, but they do so in a different manner than stories that facilitate the infliction of harm. Whereas the narratives of the perpetrators of harm reduce the interests of their targets, drug dealers' narratives reduce their perceptions of the capabilities of their adversaries. They do so by reducing police officers from distinct individuals with unique motivations and capacities for detecting and punishing drug dealers to a collective identity that is sometimes incapable, disinterested, or ineffective at doing so.

POTENTIAL SNITCHES

Humorous narratives about individuals threatening to provide information to police, or "snitch," similarly reduced the dealers' perceptions of the threat of formal punishment. These stories were comparatively rare in the interviews and observation sessions, with only one dealer, Bugs, telling two stories of this occurring to him. This rarity is unsurprising for two reasons. First, police informants in drug markets are universally maligned and typically shunned by all drug market actors who learn of their cooperation with police (see, generally, Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright, 2003). Second, "snitching," by its nature, requires the disclosure of information to police about your own involvement in the illicit drug game, which most drug market participants are reluctant to do for fear of it restricting their own illegal activity. For these reasons, drug dealers and their associates seldom

“snitch” without being compelled by potential punishment and even more seldomly make a point to tell others about it beforehand. Despite the rarity of these stories in the present study, they still warrant discussion as they demonstrate a second way that drug dealers’ narratives symbolically reduce their perceptions of the threat of formal punishment.

As stated, Bugs told two separate stories of others threatening to provide information to police about his illegal activities. In the first, told during an interview session, his ex-romantic partner threatened to go to police after their contentious break-up. We focus on the second because the lead author observed Bugs tell the story to several groups of people over a span of observations and then witnessed how the story spread among his associates and became so commonly referenced that it was distilled into a trope—that is, a short phrase representing a whole story (see Sandberg, 2016)—among them. The story, as told by Bugs over three observation periods, began with a dispute over hash oil between him and Gus, a second informant. According to Bugs, Gus returned to Bugs’s residence after purchasing three grams of hash oil from him and began shouting in front of several of their associates that Bugs had done a “fucking bait and switch” by selling him a batch of inferior grade oil. Bugs then tried to explain why he had not given Gus the superior hash oil he had reserved for his own “head stash” (drugs meant for personal consumption) but was unsuccessful at diffusing Gus’s anger. Here Bugs broke from the frame of the story (see Goffman, 1974; O’Connor, 2000) and asked his audience whether they thought it was acceptable for dealers to keep head stashes of the best stuff. At this, the audience expressed universal approval, indicated by nodding and murmurs of “yeah” and “of course” and by one subject commenting, “I expect dealers to keep the best stuff” before scrunching his face in disbelief.

After this expression of cultural support for his position, Bugs returned to the story frame, explaining that he soon tired of Gus’s tirade and called him a “chump motherfucker.” He then told Gus to “keep the 250 dollars” he owed him and told Gus “to get the fuck out.” During a later observation, Bugs told those present that Gus phoned him repeatedly after the incident in attempts to reconcile their relationship. After he continued this for some time without success, Gus called one afternoon and told Bugs to “shut up” because he “needed to hear” that he was a “shady-ass motherfucker and deserved to get rolled on.” He then told Bugs that his father is associated with the FBI and that he had informed him of Bugs’s criminal activity. In describing these statements, Bugs mocked Gus by lowering his pitch, slowing his delivery, and using dopey facial expressions and body language. Bugs’s performance elicited laughter from all present and inspired derisive comments directed toward Gus such as “what a douche-bag” and “what a fucker.” Furthermore, later during this second observation session and again during a third session, Gus was a focus of further sardonic comments and laughter from Bugs and his associates. This became so commonplace that Bugs’s associates eventually began using the trope “You fucking bait and switched me!” to refer humorously to Gus and his altercation with Bugs.

The use of humor in this narrative performed several functions for Bugs and his associates. It first indicated to Bugs’s listeners that he did not consider Gus or Gus’s threat seriously. This not only constructed Gus as a source of amusement rather than a threat but also disassociated Bugs’s identity from the threat as well—if Gus’s threat were empty, then Bugs would not be detected by police and arrested as a result of him snitching and therefore would not pose a threat to others. The responses of Bugs’s listeners to the story, particularly the distillation of the story into a trope, also provided cultural support for

Bugs's construction of Gus as unworthy of concern. Moreover, by sharing the secondhand version of this story, Bugs's listeners were also able to demonstrate and receive support for their own subcultural authority regarding how to perceive Gus's threat. Unlike dealers' narratives of "obvious," "crooked," and "impotent" police officers, this narrative did not reduce Bugs and his associates' understanding of the threat of formal punishment by flattening the identities of its primary source. It instead did so by classifying Gus as a nonthreat. Through classification, individuals in all walks of life assign meaning to the actions, words, and identities of others. In turn, those individuals get a reasonable sense of what to expect from those they have classified—and how best to respond in the event (see Blumer, 1969; Zerubavel, 1991). Thus, in classifying Gus as a nonthreat, Bugs—and his associates—created some reassurance of a nonworrisome future.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

A third and final way the dealers' humorous narratives symbolically reduced their perceptions of the threat of formal punishment was by explaining their past reactions to this threat as comical and their present dealing identities as beneath the interest of police. The dealers accomplished the former by telling stories in which they ridiculed their past cognitive and emotional reactions to the possibility of being punished. For instance, Natalie mocked her reaction after hearing that a customer had been apprehended with a large amount of marijuana by laughing uproariously when describing herself going "to a place where [she] was in an utter state of panic!" and repeatedly saying "[raises pitch] it's not fun to be a gangster!" Bobby also framed the paranoia he had experienced when selling large amounts of marijuana as overblown and laughable. "Back then I was paranoid as all get out [laughs]," he exclaimed, "Every time a car would drive by [gestures as if looking out of a phantom window], [I'm] looking out the window [laughs heartily] for no reason!" In sardonically referring to their past reactions, these dealers' narratives identify such reactions as irrational. Moreover, by identifying these reactions as irrational, these narratives also imply that the dealers, at least in their present identities, consider the threat of formal punishment as warranting a lesser degree of concern.

When the dealers explained themselves as beneath the interest of police, they did so by mocking their stature as illicit drug dealers in terms of the types and amounts of illicit drugs they sold. Perry explained his lack of worry about formal punishment by claiming, "I'm not even rolling hard enough for a cop to even give a fuck, dude, you know what I mean [smiles and chuckles]?" Natalie responded similarly when asked whether she worried about getting arrested. "They're not gonna come looking for somebody that's moving an ounce or two or three a week," she explained, "It's just not in their books [laughs]!" And Erin laughed while identifying herself as "very small time." Here again humor positions the dealers' narrative identities in relation to their perceptions of the threat of formal punishment. In these narratives, however, the dealers' humor does not position them as superior to police but instead as being of a stature beneath police interest. In both cases, however, dealers lessen their perceptions of the likelihood that they will experience formal punishment.

In these narratives, the dealers' use of humor acts a mechanism facilitating their constructions of what Taylor (1983a) referred to as "positive illusions." When developing positive illusions, individuals look at a set of facts in a "particular light" because a different view would "yield a less positive picture" (Taylor, 1983b: 1161; see also Seligman,

2006) and may impede their desired behavior. Although it is possible that these dealers were of interest to police and could be caught soon, their use of denigrating humor in these narratives facilitated disregard of this possibility by constructing positive illusions regarding police interest in their activities. These narratives then partially explain to the dealers and their listeners why they persist in selling drugs despite the risk of punishment.

The impact of these dealers' narratives of obvious, crooked, and impotent police officers and potential snitches and the positive illusions on their identities; their understanding of the risks of selling illicit drugs; and their subsequent behavior can also be explained with concepts taken from the results of recent research on genre work. By drawing from the findings of Smith's (2005) analysis of the mechanisms leading nations into war, Frank (2010) suggested that the genre of an individual's story, or the type of story it is (e.g., comedy, tragedy, or romance), is a key factor determining how he or she responds to it. That is, if an individual's story is constructed as a tragedy—a genre in which terrible things have or are likely to happen to a protagonist and are sure to continue—he or she may wallow in anguish and anxiety and fail to emplot a future where good things may happen to him or her. Whereas stories constructed as romances—a genre in which the protagonist has an upward trajectory despite an environment of struggle—may influence individuals to persevere in their lines of action no matter the obstacles placed in their paths. Smith (2005) highlighted that the genre of a story is susceptible to change in accordance with how it is presented to others and, moreover, that the genre applied to a story can also amplify or diminish the threat posed by the story's antagonist.

On the surface, drug dealers' stories about their experiences with police, snitches, and their fears of being punished could be considered tragedies, particularly among those dealers that had been arrested by police. After all, frequently committing actions that might lead to prison time or other punishments exemplifies the popular cultural narrative that those who play with fire get burned. The results of our analysis suggest that by constructing what they consider humorous narratives of their experiences with the threat of punishment, drug dealers shape the genre of these narratives into romances. This method then diminishes the dealers' assessments of the threat posed by police. Moreover, because the genre of a story and the identity implied by the story necessitate questions such as "What outcomes follow in this kind of story?" and "If I am in this genre of story, what therefore should I do?" (Frank, 2010: 142), the conversion of dealers' storied identities from potential tragedies into romances likely influences them to continue selling despite the potential risks involved.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this article was to explore the role humor plays in how drug dealers' narratives construct their identities, their perceptions of the threat of formal punishment, and their cultural membership and authority. Through humor, drug dealers assert their superiority over other uncircumspect, or "stupid," dealers and users and thus identify themselves as different or "smart." In doing so, dealers also demonstrate their subcultural authority regarding what is unacceptable behavior in drug-dealing circles, claim membership in the symbolic group of "smart" dealers, and receive verification of these claims from their listeners. Illicit drug dealers' humorous narratives also act as a means for dealers to express historical discontinuity from their former and virtual careless behavior and the identities they imply. Finally, the dealers' humorous narratives

symbolically reduce their perceptions of the threat posed by police and potential police informants by classifying them as undeserving of worry and by classifying themselves as unworthy of interest.

These findings are important first because they further specify one way by which offenders' narratives construct symbolic boundaries. Barth (1998) argued that it is the symbolic boundary around a particular cultural group that defines the identities of the members of that group, not the "cultural stuff" the boundary encloses. Hence, it is critical to study how offenders create and maintain their symbolic boundaries if we are to understand how they construct their identities, what these identities say about how they wish to be viewed and treated by others, and how these identities influence their behavior (see Copes, 2016; Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008). Lamont and Molnár (2002) argued that a key way groups differentiate themselves is by establishing and maintaining superiority over outgroups on some dimension (see also Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The results of our analysis, in drawing from extant literature on humor (see, e.g., Fine, 1983; Glasgow, 1997; Morreall, 1983; Zillman, 1983), builds on the findings of previous research suggesting that offenders construct symbolic boundaries through narratives (see, e.g., Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Marsh, Copes, and Linnemann, 2017; Webb, Deitzer, and Copes, 2016) by highlighting that, among drug dealers at least, humor is a key mechanism facilitating this process.

The findings from the present study join those from previous research in suggesting that humor plays an important role in the development of group unity (see, e.g., Coser, 1959; Davies, 1982; Fine, 1983; Glasgow, 1997; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988). Here we add to this research by demonstrating that humor's function as an expression of superiority, the symbolic boundaries this expression shapes, and its function in demonstrating cultural authority help foster and maintain group unity among illicit drug dealers. The humor used in these offenders' stories of their experiences with the risk of police detection separates them and listeners who approve of it from others whom they deem different—that is, "stupid" users and dealers—while giving them a characteristic—"being smart"—to identify with. Similarly, dealers and others also build feelings of group unity and companionship by sharing humorous secondhand stories about the police corruption and potential "snitches." In addition, these findings add to those from previous research by arguing that narratives in general play key roles in group construction (see, e.g., Davis, 2002; Frank, 2010; Polletta, 2006) by demonstrating that it is sometimes the humor in narratives that facilitates their function in fostering the development of groups (see Zillman, 1983).

The results of our analysis also have implications for understanding how offenders' narratives influence their future behavior and that of others. Numerous scholars have argued that this influence stems from how narratives establish and emplot the identities of narrators (see, e.g., DeGloma, 2010; Davis, 2000; Frank, 2010; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1996; Polletta et al., 2011; Presser, 2013). We add to this literature by demonstrating that it is not only the content of drug dealers' narratives but also their tone that constructs dealers' identities and emplots their future actions. In addition, our findings suggest a second way that narratives construct drug dealers' identities and influence their subsequent behavior—by shaping their perceptions of the risks posed by sources of formal punishment.

These drug dealers' humorous narratives reduced their perceptions of the threats posed by police by flattening the identities of police into a collective identity largely incapable of detecting wrongdoing and enforcing punishment—provided, of course, that the dealers

did not engage in “stupid” behavior. They similarly reduced their understandings of the threat posed by potential police informants by classifying them as nonthreats. By reducing the variability of police identities and by altering their view of police informants, the dealers positioned themselves as persons who need not worry about these threats as long as they continued being “smart.” In doing so, the dealers altered the genre of their stories from potential tragedies to potential romances. And this alteration, in turn, may have influenced the dealers’ subsequent behavior by mapping a future where good things (i.e., avoiding punishment) were sure to continue happening.

If viewed through a positivistic lens, the present findings may also have implications for current understanding of the deterrence process among illicit drug dealers. Put succinctly, deterrence occurs when individuals contemplating an action refrain from the action or alter their behavior in some way in “response to ... perceived risk and fear of punishment” (Gibbs, 1975: 2). Whether potential offenders abandon contemplated crimes or alter them is in large part a result of their perceptions (Geerken and Gove, 1975; Zimring and Hawkins, 1973) of the likelihood of detection or, in the language of deterrence, the certainty of punishment (Pogarsky, 2002). The results of a substantial body of research have highlighted numerous factors that may influence potential offenders’ perceptions of the certainty of punishment, ranging from moral inhibition (see, e.g., Bachman, Paternoster, and Ward, 1992) to past experiences with punishment and punishment avoidance (see, e.g., Andenaes, 1974; Minor and Harry, 1982; Tittle, 1980; see also Nagin, 1998, 2013, for excellent overviews of extant perceptual deterrence literature).

The results of our analysis suggest several potential influences humorous narratives may have on drug dealers’ perceptions of the likelihood of punishment. First, drug dealers’ perceptions may be altered by the symbolic boundaries separating “being stupid” and “being smart” that they and others construct in their humorous narratives. Dealers may avoid those distinguished as “stupid” by these boundaries and thereby remove, at least from their perception, the possibility of these “stupid” others directing police attention toward the dealers through uncircumspect behavior. This approach, in turn, may reduce dealers’ perceptions of risk. The historical discontinuity drug dealers and users construct between their past and present identities may also influence their and other dealers’ perceptions of risk. By identifying themselves as “smart,” and therefore unlikely to commit “stupid” actions again, dealers may increase their perception that they are clever enough to avoid possible sanctions and thereby lessen their assessments of the certainty of punishment. In identifying themselves as “smart” and no longer “stupid” and by demonstrating their subcultural authority regarding what constitutes risky behavior when drug dealing, dealers and users also indicate to others that they are less risky to deal with. This may then lessen perceptions of the certainty of punishment among these others as well. Finally, drug dealers’ version of humorous stories wherein they reduce perceived threats may also decrease their perceptions of the risks associated with dealing. By identifying police as “obvious,” “crooked,” or “impotent” and potential police informants as less threatening, dealers may subtract the risk posed by them from their risk assessments. They may also subtract the threat posed by police by using denigrating humor to identify themselves as below the threshold of police interest. This may then discount dealers’ perceptions of potential costs such that they are outweighed by their perceptions of potential reward, thereby encouraging them to continue selling illicit drugs.

Beyond drug dealers, the present study also has implications for understanding the role of narratives and, more specifically, of unification, periodization, and the construction of symbolic boundaries, in offending writ large. Recall that through the process of emplotment, individuals give meaning to their personal story (Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Frank, 2010). Also recall that personal stories *are* identities (Davis, 2000) and, moreover, that one's storied identity is not only constructed out of the past but also directs one's future actions (Bruner, 1987; Frank, 2010; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1985). Hence, when individuals contemplate criminal actions, they have first constructed storied identities that explain how the past events in their lives have led to this contemplation. Whether they then carry out these contemplated crimes is dependent on how they have constructed their understanding of the risks involved as they are related to their storied identities. Our findings highlight several narrative mechanisms that are likely used by all individuals when constructing identities that may or may not emplot criminal actions. First, individuals may use unification to join their past experiences with punishment or with punishment avoidance with their present identities. In the former case, individuals may perceive of themselves as likely to get caught and punished again as they have constructed identities wherein they view themselves as the same persons who got caught and punished in the past. In the latter case, individuals may perceive themselves as unlikely to be detected and punished because they have constructed identities wherein they view themselves as persons who are successful at avoiding punishment. Second, individuals may use periodization to separate their past experiences with punishment or with punishment avoidance from their present identities. By constructing historical discontinuity between their experiences with punishment and their present identities, individuals may construct identities wherein they view themselves as unlikely to be caught and punished because they do not associate themselves with these instances in the past. Contrarily, by constructing historical discontinuity between their experiences with punishment avoidance and their present identities, individuals may construct identities wherein they view themselves as less likely to avoid punishment again because they have not incorporated their past success at avoiding punishment into their identities. Third, individuals may also construct symbolic boundaries between themselves and others who have been detected and punished and thereby create narrative identities distinct from these others. These individuals may then perceive themselves as unlikely to be detected and punished because they view themselves as different types of persons than those who get caught and punished.

Eighty years ago, Edwin Sutherland (1937) noted how the use of humor served an important function for thieves attempting to occlude their fears of being caught and formally punished from discouraging them from further offending (p. 183). In the time since, scant criminological attention has been paid to exploring the diverse roles humor may play in the foreground, commission, and aftermath of crime. The present study has highlighted a few key ways in which offenders' use of humor may influence their crime-related decisions, but as has been noted by those conducting extant research outside of criminology, humor is a ubiquitous and multifaceted construct that likely serves many more functions. Thus, we do not intend for this study to settle all criminological questions regarding humor and humorous narratives but instead for it to motivate further criminological exploration of the various functions that the use of humor and narratives perform for offenders, victims, bystanders, and law enforcement agents.

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