

Eötvös Loránd University

Doctoral School of Law

**IN THE SHADOW OF THE IVORY TOWER**

**The university drug scene and the roles in it: users – social suppliers - dealers**

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Summary of Doctoral Thesis

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## **1. Introduction, research question and theoretical approach**

Why did I choose the issue of drug distribution in universities? I started exploring the topic during my Master's degree in criminology, although the central focus of the research at that time was the organised crime approach to low-level drug distribution. I did not follow this theoretical framework in this thesis, as it dealt with the how rather than the why of distribution, i.e. it was of introductory interest but did not provide nearly the depth of analysis needed to explore the scene. A similar experience was reported by Buccerius (2007, 2014) when he realised, while studying the drug distribution of second-generation immigrants in Frankfurt, that the organisation and logistics of the trade itself were not very interesting from a criminological point of view, as they were hardly different from other small business perspectives. Instead, it is the individual characteristics, motivations and cultural milieu of the scene that deserve attention, and I myself conducted my doctoral research with this approach.

In terms of its framework, I draw on authors and theories that are primarily linked to the interactionist and critical paradigm, including Zinberg (2005), Sykes and Matza (2001), Rácz (2006), Sandberg (2022) and Parker et al. (2000). The consequence of this is that the issue of social status and the status of identity is given special attention. While the critical paradigm typically interprets through the large social systems that provide the structures, the intersectionalist paradigm mostly explains social phenomena at the level of the agent individual. One of the objectives of narrative criminology, which is considered to be a newer trend within the discipline, was to bridge the gap between structure and agency-based approaches (Presser & Sandberg, 2019). Due to its mediating role, this school provided an adequate toolkit for exploring the research topic, despite the fact that narrative criminology is not yet embedded in the domestic academic discourse.

My research questions were the following:

1. What are the characteristics and determinants of social status in the university drug scene?
2. How does and how does the university environment influence the relationship with the drug scene?
3. How is the distribution career path structured and what are the typical stages?
4. How does the involvement in distribution (and aid) affect identity and how is it reflected in personal relationships?

## **2. Methodology**

In the course of my research, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with 38 people, students who are active in the drug scene in Budapest. In terms of their position, they included both casual and problematic users (9), social suppliers

(18) and profit-oriented distributors (11). The subjects ranged in age from 20 to 28, all but three were students at universities in Budapest, and more than two thirds (26) were born in Budapest.

I reached the subjects through snowballing and networking methods, as personal recommendation was my guarantee of reliability. With the exception of two subjects, I did not know any of them from a previous experience, which is why I had to rely on the referral system. As the research topic consists of offences that are subject to serious criminal sanctions, I anonymised all interviews and randomly generated code names for the subjects for the quotes used. The interviews were mainly conducted in cafés and bars, which are natural, informal and safe environments for the student life in Budapest.

### 3. Results

1. A safe and predictable environment is a feature of everyday life for students, with or without a drug scene. One of the main consequences of higher social status is the almost complete lack of experience of violence. What can be described as a subculture of violence is the consequence of social structures such as insecurity or at least a constant difficulty in making a living, a punitive or repressive state which may work specifically against marginalised communities, or the closure of mobility channels. The middle-class university layer has to contend with other structural factors. The social norm is the alternative means of resolving conflicts, and from early socialisation it penalises violence. This group tends to rely on the state and the power of the law to resolve conflicts.
2. Symbolic boundaries are created in the relationship between the substances consumed and, more specifically, the substances not consumed. Almost everyone on the scene rejects designer drugs, explaining their extremely dangerous harmful effects on health. In the interpretation of the people I interviewed, the use of these drugs is associated with absolute deprivation, where the consumer has no choice between traditional drugs. The designers are therefore not only dangerous as substances in themselves, but they also reflect the low social status of their users, in line with the Zinberg triad.
3. Being a university student in the context of the drug scene is a socially condoned rebellion that is part of the milieu. After graduation, as the freedom of the institution and with it the normalisation at the local level fades, the hitherto non-conformist students become conformist white-collar workers. The message of the broader narrative is that a certain amount of cautious norm-breaking is allowed in these few years, because it will fit into a later conformist life path. This expectation is not unfounded in itself, since it is a criminological truism, as developmental criminology has pointed out,

among others, that people gradually age out of crime (and with it, norm-breaking).

4. If we look at distribution as a linear criminal career, we can see consumers becoming facilitators and then facilitators becoming distributors. Both the literature and my own research have confirmed that even low-level distribution does not provide sufficient coverage of the drug market, i.e. a layer of intermediaries is needed: the auxiliaries. Although the very concept of facilitation is rather simple (only for acquaintances, for no or minimal profit), it has an extensive typology. What is a typology from a professional point of view is an abstract translation of the practice of the many different paths that lead to the provision of auxiliary services. The need for quality, adventure, or even saving money, are all factors. The most important factor, however, is the social effect, the unity of a circle of consumers and friends.
5. The tension between business and friendship can be described by the metaphor of a tightrope walk. Both auxiliaries and distributors strive to find a balance between the two extremes. Failure to do so can result in the loss of friendships, the erosion of friendships of interest, risky profit maximisation or even financial difficulties due to excessive indulgence (discounts and gifts). I have defined the successful equilibrium state in terms of pleasant service, in which the person can reconcile the profit maximisation of the business side with the status of the friendship side. From the consumer side, there is a double perception of the nature of the pleasant service, partly it helps neutralisation, they do not need to be in contact with an environment alien to their social status, but stay within the familiar university - friendly relations. On the other hand, it places a permanent socialization pressure on them, where cultivating a friendly relationship with the distributor is an expectation, which is an extra and hidden cost on top of the business side of the transaction.
6. The way university distributors see themselves can be interpreted on a spectrum. At one end is an instrumental role, that of the entrepreneur, whose goal is to earn income, and drugs are only a means to that end. At the other end is the organic role, the shaman, whose priorities are reversed, for whom the drug is the goal and the income from it is merely a means. Of course, these are not found in their ideal purity in reality, but the subjects of the research can all be mapped out in this coordinate system. For the entrepreneur, distribution itself can be understood as a kind of professional practice, a way of gaining experience, of seeing a niche in the market and exploiting it. From the shaman's point of view, the drug is more than a stupefying stimulant, it is an exploitable opportunity with a rich culture. Part of the shaman's role is to introduce others to safe consumption, to show how these drugs can be used in a framework of self-improvement, trauma processing.

## Results

A doctoral thesis can have several purposes. My own was to explain how and why a certain type of criminal career comes about. That is, how some students in Hungarian (Budapest) higher education become drug dealers.

The university environment, which is the setting of my research, was depicted through a dense description. I treated the medium as if I had wandered into completely unknown territory, similar to ethnographies dealing with drug distribution. That is, just as we don't question why we spend so much time (and pages) mapping the homes of these characters far from the academy, I followed that logic here, with regard to the students in Budapest.

## List of publications

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