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The intimacies of drug dealing: narcotics, kinship and embeddedness in Nicaragua and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore how and to what extent it is useful to think about drug dealing through the conceptual lens of intimacy. Such an approach both complements and challenges mainstream views on drug dealing, which see the phenomenon as based on ‘formal-rational’ organisation and practices. We explore the intimacies of drug dealing along three axes: the involvement of kin and family, ‘governing intimacy’ and as embedded in culturally intimate models and ideas. Drawing on our collaborative ethnographic research in Nicaragua and South Africa, we illustrate first how family and kin are implicated in drug dealing, both voluntarily and against their will. Secondly, we explore how drug dealing institutes or produces particular forms of order, often entangled with state and policing governance, folding itself into communal and family relations. Finally, we consider the extent to which drug dealing enters into local notions and rationalities, from models of how to be a ‘good’ drug dealer to how one’s daughter should conduct her love life. These analyses allow us to suggest new avenues for research on drug dealing that foreground social embeddedness and gender relations.

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Introduction

One of the most influential scholarly interventions about the dynamics of drug dealing over the past couple of decades is undoubtedly Levitt and Venkatesh’s (2000) detailed economic analysis of a drug selling gang’s finances. Drawing on a unique data set, namely formal accounting ledgers containing detailed financial information about the gang’s activities, they highlight how drug dealing often obeys well-defined, systematic rules. More specifically, they effectively portray the gang as a ‘formal-rational’ organisation, imbued with a particular economic logic responding to endogenous dynamics, and carried out by ‘individuals that are structurally distinct from the rest of the population’ (Antillano and Zubillaga 2014, 132). Decker and van Winkle (1994, 583–584) succinctly summarised this vision of things when they stated that

to control drug sales effectively, gangs must possess several characteristics. First, an organizational structure must be present. This hierarchy must have leaders, roles, and rules. Second,

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group goals must be shared widely among members. Third, allegiance to the larger organization must be stronger than to any subgroups within it. Finally, the gang must possess the means to control and discipline its members so as to produce compliance with group goals.

Such a perspective has arguably become the mainstream view of drug dealing, and has been put forward by scholars all over the world (eg Arias 2017; McLean et al. 2018; Lessing and Willis 2019; Padilla 1992; Pyrooz and Decker 2019; Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Skarbek 2014; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009).

At the same time, however, as Decker and van Winkle (1994, 584) also point out, such a vision of drug dealing is 'inconsistent' with the vast majority of gang studies that have highlighted the importance of more 'informal social processes' in their emergence and constitution (Fagan 1989, 658). Indeed, this is something that was implicitly noted by Venkatesh and Levitt (2000) in a companion piece to their above-mentioned article, which they titled 'Are We a Family or a Business?' Although their analysis ultimately focuses on the 'corporatisation' of the drug-selling gang they studied, their question can be interpreted as signalling potential doubts with regard to the underlying nature of the dynamics of drug dealing. Certainly, a number of scholars have explored the way that drug dealing is often an activity that can be fundamentally linked to relations that are generally considered antithetical to 'formal-rational' organisation. Zamudio Angles (2009, 2012), for example, has extensively studied how small-scale drug trafficking in the *Delegación Iztapalapa* area of Mexico City is embedded in kinship networks. In particular, he traces how a single extended family – *los Pericos* – living in different parts of the same neighbourhood block coordinated to organise themselves into selling point, consumption point, and vigilance points to ensure the smooth running of their drug dealing, and how familial relations were the basis for understanding authority within the group. More generally, many scholars have highlighted the importance of friendship and kinship networks in the recruitment of dealers and others involved in the drugs trade, particularly at the street or local level (see Bourgois 1995; Contreras 2013; van Dun 2014; Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2015).

Yet – with the notable exception of Muehlmann's (2014) study of 'narco-culture' in the US–Mexico borderlands – research into the dynamics of drug dealing has generally tended to examine informal social relations such as family and kinship only very incidentally. This article therefore proposes to explore what insights we might glean into drug dealing if we foreground the informal more centrally in our analysis, drawing more specifically on the conceptual lens of 'intimacy'. We do not equate family, kinship or friendship with intimacy or suggest that intimacy is only relevant in these 'institutional' forms. Rather, we suggest that intimacy, as a property of particular relational forms, is particularly visible in such settings. It is also not reducible to gender, although gender will most often be central in discussions about intimacy. In this way, we suggest that the concept of intimacy allows us to foreground – but not reduce to – gendered family and kinship as well as patronage and friendship networks in the study of drug dealing. The concept of intimacy has gained increasing traction over the past few decades, especially within anthropology (Berlant 1998; Das 2006; Povinelli 2006). Intimacy is first and foremost central to understanding gendered and domestic power relations, and the reproduction of patriarchal relations and inequalities in society (Cannell 1999). In relation to drug dealing, the intimacy lens allows us to see how drug dealing is embedded in such relations in ways that go beyond the instrumental. At the same time, however, intimacy is not just about family, kinship or domestic arrangements. It

is also an indispensable part of governance more generally. Seen from this perspective, we can talk of 'governing intimacy' (Oswin and Olund 2010) as a mechanism of control.

Certainly, as Goodfellow and Mulla (2008, 259) put it,

domestic relations are enmeshed within the formidable and subtle regulatory processes of such things as the law, institutional ethical discourses, moral economies, therapeutic practices, and such things as the sense of taboo that infuses intimacy and other forms of affiliation found in household relations.

This means that intimacy often 'serves as a primary domain of the microphysics of power' (Oswin and Olund 2010, 62), and that 'to study the intimate is not to turn away from structures of dominance but to relocate their conditions of possibility and relations and forces of production' (Stoler 2006, 13). Relating this to drug dealing, it suggests that the governance of gangs and other drug-dealing organisations, including phenomena such as gang wars or the enforcement of complicity, as well as that carried out by states, for example in the form of the 'war on drugs', are often enacted through and on intimate relations. Put another way, following Auyero and Berti (2015), we need to understand how both drug dealing and state violence are 'folded' into the intimate lives of people.

At the same time, there also exists an emerging literature focussing on intimacy beyond the domestic sphere into more communal and collective forms of intimacy (see Jensen and Hapal, 2022). As Berlant (1998, 281) has suggested, 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness'. Certainly, in his discussion of the notion of 'cultural intimacy', Herzfeld (2014) elaborates on the way that intimacy extends beyond the domestic sphere by suggesting that there exist intimate ways of knowing each other, for example in the form of implicit embarrassments that are shared, expressed through little ironies and eye-winks. Seen from this perspective, 'cultural intimacy is the space of all such self-recognition' (Herzfeld 2014, 8). Thinking through these forms of cultural intimacies in relation to drug dealing suggests a need to pay attention to how shared notions of morality and ethics exist within areas where drug dealing takes place, in a manner akin to what Roitman (2006) labels the 'ethics of illegality' (see also Rodgers 2015).

In this article we therefore ask how and to what extent is it useful to explore drug-dealing dynamics through a more intimate lens. How do different conceptions of intimacy allow us to say something else about drug dealing beyond the mainstream? What do they reveal that is perhaps less considered? To explore these questions, we draw on collaborative ethnographic research on gang dynamics carried out in Nicaragua and South Africa in 2019 and 2020. Our research in the former focuses on *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,¹ a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, while research in the latter took place in two different areas of the Cape Flats in Cape Town, South Africa.² Individually, we have been carrying out research in these areas since the mid-1990s.³ As part of a larger project on comparing gangs ethnographically,⁴ we embarked on collaborative fieldwork where we visited each other's respective field sites. Over the years we have been writing together, but this project allowed us to begin to systematically compare across our two contexts. Rather than comparing the two sites deductively – through 'more or less', 'before or after' questions – we sought to identify what we refer to as 'epistemo-methodological disjunctures' – that is to say, conceptually significant quandaries that emerged from our collaborative fieldwork. The collaborative fieldwork became an occasion for rich reflections about concepts, empirical data and methods that led to new insights on our fields, including

for the locally ‘experienced’ field worker (see Jensen and Rodgers, forthcoming, for more details).⁵

When we began conducting research and fieldwork together, intimate relations very rapidly and overwhelmingly took centre stage in much of our discussions and reflections on our fieldwork. While drugs differed and gang organisation and policing took on specific and contextual forms, the embeddedness of drug dealing emerged as a critical common epistemo-methodological disjuncture. In this way, our collaborative fieldwork allowed us to explore the intimacies of drug dealing as a central element of drug dealing across the two contexts without engaging in a deductive comparison of different family or kinship networks, for instance. We begin by detailing the extent to which drug dealing in Nicaragua and South Africa is embedded in family and kin relations, while not being reducible to them. Secondly, we explore how drug dealing animates and is rendered possible through intimate, communal relations through drug governance. Thirdly, we explore how intelligible forms of cultural intimacy emerge in and around drug dealing. These three sections allow us to conclude on the various ways it may be useful to think about drug dealing by foregrounding intimate domestic and communal relations, and how this also enables a more gendered analysis of the phenomenon.

Drug dealing up close and personal

The importance of more intimate relations for the organisation of the drugs trade was evident in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in the way that dealers were often recruited through friendship and kinship networks. Certainly, the local drug economy’s originator, *el Indio Viejo*, initially recruited dealers from former and current neighbourhood gang members when he began to establish the local drugs trade (see Rodgers 2017b, 2018). As a former gang member himself from the early 1990s, he commanded respect from subsequent generations, and both recruited *púsheres*⁶ (mid-level dealers) and vetted *muleros* (street dealers) from this particular group of individuals. The first wave of dealers that he recruited in the early 2000s, however, began to thin out due to attrition, law enforcement or internal conflict by the mid-2000s, and many new dealers were subsequently recruited through familial links (with the group of existing dealers led by *el Indio Viejo*). One example in this regard was Soraya – nicknamed the ‘*Reina del Sur*’ (Queen of the South), after a popular Colombian television show on drug dealing – who was recruited as a *mulera* by the husband of her cousin, who was then *el Indio Viejo*’s right-hand man. This is something that occurred rather organically, however, as she described during an interview on 5 February 2020:

Soraya: ‘My mother and I moved in with my aunt when we left my father. There were five of us in the house – me, my mother, my aunt, my cousin and my cousin’s husband. You know him, Dennis, he’s the one they call “Pac-man”, so you know he’s a *narcotraficante* (drug dealer). My aunt and my cousin would help him from time to time with his *bisnes* (illegal business), but this was when the drugs trade was increasing, and he had lots to do, and they started asking me to “do them a favour”, to help them. At first it was small things, you know, moving drugs or money from one place to another, or helping them “cook” cocaine into crack, but after a while I started selling for him as a *mulera*, in the streets’.

Dennis: ‘How old were you then?’

Soraya: ‘I was 16 to 17 at the time.’

Dennis: 'That's young to start in that line of work!'

Soraya: 'I wasn't doing it so much for the money, it was because they were family, you know, they would ask me to help, and I would say, *dale pues* (sure), of course I'll help you. "Take this for me", they would say, or "Come with me", and I'd accompany them when they went to make deliveries, because the police would be less suspicious of me, as a young girl, you know.'

Soraya's story highlights how her recruitment responded to logics that entangled both personal and instrumental motivations. On the one hand, her status as a young woman made her instrumentally useful to carry out certain drug-dealing operations without attracting suspicion, while on the other hand, her familial connection made it difficult for her to refuse to help her aunt and her cousin's husband. The latter was something that we were also able to observe in Cape Town during an interview with a street dealer called Charity on 23 May 2019, when she explained how her involvement began as a teenager when she went to live with her uncle:

Charity: 'My uncle was a [drug "merchant" (dealer)], he smuggled [dealt] *tik* and *buttons*.⁷ He's a 26 [gang member], and was in prison almost 10 to 15 years. He went in as a teenager [for smuggling on the streets], and came out when he was an adult. He bought a house [when he got out], and he smuggled from there. I went to live with him there, and helped him smuggle. I would usually take the drugs, to go and hide it by [a seller] in a backstreet, or I would go fetch it and so forth.'

Dennis: 'So, you would deliver it to people to sell?'

Charity: 'Yes.'

Steffen: 'Like a runner?'

Charity: 'Like a runner, yes. But I would also sell it when my uncle was busy. Like cutting the stuff, putting it in packets, and I would sell the stuff to people who came, and so on. But then I got in trouble. A police officer caught me with drugs. My uncle bailed me out, but I didn't show up at his place again, I still have an outstanding warrant.'

Clearly implicit in Charity's narrative is the sense that kinship-mediated involvement in drug dealing also carries significant ambiguities. This is something that Gay (2005) also highlights in his life history of Lucia, 'a Brazilian drug-dealer's woman' – or, more accurately, the serial partner of several drug dealers. On the one hand, Lucia describes the material benefits of becoming a drug dealer's partner, including being paid a weekly 'salary' (Gay 2005, 127) in order to be able to shop for clothes and other cosmetic items to use 'to look good for my man'. On the other hand, two of the dealers whom Lucia partnered with ended up being killed by rivals while the third was arrested for drug dealing and received a long-term prison sentence, and Lucia moved continuously between poverty and (relative) affluence as a result, as well as suffering a range of different forms of violence, including being beaten up and shot in the leg. It is moreover clear from her narrative that she suffered significant opprobrium from certain sectors of *favela* society – including in particular evangelical Christian members of her extended family – due to her association with drug dealing (although Lucia herself is quite ambiguous and her own self-presentation changes over time).

In this regard, however, in a follow-up interview with Soraya about her drug dealing on 24 February 2020, when we asked her 'What about your mother, did she get involved as well?', she replied the following:

Soraya: 'No, no, my mother is evangelical! But she knew about it, she just couldn't say anything to her sister, so she would spend as little time as possible in the house, and just went to church.'

Dennis: 'And she never said anything to you? She never asked you to stop selling?'

Soraya: 'No, no, she only ever told me that I shouldn't sell to fellow evangelicals ...'

However, Soraya then went on to tell us about how she left the drugs trade, explaining how 'when I had my son in 2007, I stopped selling regularly. When my aunt or cousin needed me, I'd still help, but I no longer did it all the time, although sometimes, when I needed money, I'd sell a few *catos* (packets) here and there.'

Dennis: 'So, you were a part-time seller, then?'

Soraya: 'Only when I needed to, and I stopped completely after I moved out of my aunt's place, when I went to live with Elvis [the father of her son]. The problem until then is that I had been living with my aunt and cousin, and they were dealing, so it was difficult not to be involved. That's why when I broke up with Elvis, and he left for the US in 2010, when I went back to living with my aunt again, I got back into drug dealing.'

Dennis: 'And what about now? You're no longer living with your aunt any more, are you?'

Soraya: 'No, I'm not, but I stopped before that, because of my son. When I went back to live with my aunt, the police started coming round a lot to her house. Although they didn't keep drugs in the house, and they'd never find anything, her and my cousin were *fichados*, and so they kept on coming round. *Me daba nervios* (it got on my nerves), though, and one time, in 2012, I got so annoyed with the police. They were searching my room and breaking my things, and I shouted at them, and they took me, they took my aunt, my cousin and her husband, and we were put in the district police station jail for three days. It's horrible there, I tell you, there's no beds, nothing, only metal frames, no mattresses, and the women who are already there are treacherous, they either tell you to sit or lie down next to them or ask you to give them whatever you have, and the bathroom has no doors, no walls, it was dirty, and women would follow you in to observe We'd sleep together for security, but it was a terrible *zancudero* (mosquito breeding ground), so you couldn't sleep ... I cried the whole time, but I was not crying because I was jailed, but for my son, thinking "What will he think?", "Who will take care of him?". I was crying because I thought I would never see him again, and that he would know that I'd been imprisoned On the third day, though, the *Guardias* (police) came and called my name and I was able to leave. My cousin and her husband were also released, but not my aunt, she was condemned to prison for 5 years. It made me think even more, "What if it had been me?", "What would happen to my son?" ... *Eso no es vida andar cayendo preso* (Being imprisoned is no life), and so I decide there and then that I would stop dealing, for my son.'

Dennis: 'What about your cousin and her husband?'

Soraya: 'They've continued, which is also why I decided to stop living with them. They still put pressure on me to continue working for them, but I don't do so like before. I still go and visit them, of course, and every time I go, I see him working cocaine, 2 to 3 kilogrammes each time, but I don't sell for them anymore, at most I just accompany them whilst they're working, or when they go and make deliveries.'

Although Soraya is still drawn into indirect involvement in drug dealing on an occasional basis through her kinship relations, others, including most notably her son, also drew her out, highlighting the fundamentally equivocal role that kinship can play in structuring the

drugs trade. But kinship is also a medium through which the drugs trade can condition everyday life, as became very obvious in South Africa, in particular in relation to Norma, a community activist and one of Steffen's key informants. Norma is a formidable personality. Her Facebook feed is full of joyous moments, showing off brightly coloured clothes, changing hair colours and dancing, as well as community calls in relation to shack fires, police brutality, food distribution schemes and, most recently, advice regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Most mornings, Norma spends hours attending to local inhabitants' questions about electricity, ID cards, housing, health, domestic abuse or the gang violence that afflicts her township. She is a leading member of the local housing committee, and a crucial point of contact for a variety of state agencies that have outsourced much of their service delivery in townships to volunteers like Norma. She organises local community work programmes employing hundreds of local community members, and is knowledgeable about accounting, project management and fire extinction practices, as well as research and conflict resolution, partly due to the extensive training she has received from outside researchers (like Steffen), and local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the municipal authorities.

Norma has four sons, of whom two are doing well while the two youngest, John and Clyde, often find themselves in trouble. The elder of these two, Clyde, joined the local gang at the age of 13, becoming heavily involved in drug dealing. During an interview on 22 May 2019, Norma told us how when she found out that he'd been given his gang tattoo by an older member of the gang, she had wanted to 'burn it out'. Burning out here refers to the practice of pressing the tattoo on a cooking plate to obscure the gang sign. She told us how other members of her family had had to restrain her, however, because 'they said I must let it go. It was too late'. Since then, Clyde – now 25 – has spent the better part of his life in and out of prison for a variety of violent and drug-related crimes. Norma has tried to care for her son as best she can, visiting him in prison, and trying to keep him on the straight and narrow when he comes out. She has even gone as far as turning him in to the police in order to protect him from the gang. Since he came out of prison for his latest stint of freedom in late 2018, she has been watching him and caring for him to keep him away from drugs and from the gang. Through her connections with the municipal authorities, she managed to land him a public works job, and she also takes him around to different people and organisations whom she thinks might be able to help. The pressure from his former gang comrades and the local drug dealers is relentless, however, and she was clearly fighting a losing battle to keep him away from drugs and the gang.

The enormous tensions and ambivalence that she felt in relation to her son's drug dealing were very clearly manifested in an episode that she recounted to Steffen during a conversation on 3 May 2019: 'yesterday, as I was preparing food, my youngest son [John] said that he was thinking of joining the gang [like his brother Clyde]. I got so upset that I lashed out with the knife and hit him here [indicating a spot near the right shoulder]. There was so much blood. I simply did not know what I did'. She then showed Steffen her hand, wrapped in a bandage where the knife, slipping as she lashed out, had cut her. Norma was clearly shocked by her visceral reaction, which could obviously be linked to the intimate nature of the kinship relationship at the heart of the issue. At the same time, however, it also reflected an ambivalence that was linked to a much broader – but in many ways no less intimate – association with drug dealing and consumption, as the next section details.

The intimate governance of drug dealing

On 3 May 2019, Steffen held a meeting with a group of community activists in one of the townships he works in, to set up and organise research prior to Dennis's arrival for their first round of collaborative fieldwork on gangs. Steffen had previously worked with these community activists on gang violence more indirectly, and he put forward the idea that they needed to look more closely at the gang war that had been raging in the area for the past year and a half. This war had claimed the lives of over 150 residents, mostly young men but also bystanders caught in the crossfire, and random people with little or no connection to the gang. Steffen's interlocutors began moving uncomfortably in their chairs, throwing anxious glances towards the open shack door, fearful that somebody outside might be listening in, even if gangs and drugs had been a regular topic of conversation over the years.

When Steffen recounted the episode to Dennis, the latter's first thought was that it sounded very much like the situation he had encountered in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in the late 2000s, when drug dealing had professionalised. This had entailed the local gang that had initially been at the centre of its operations being (violently) replaced by a shadowy group of outsiders known locally as the '*cartelito*' (little cartel), whose members local inhabitants often did not know (see Rodgers 2018). The *cartelito* had sought to consolidate its domination over the neighbourhood through a sustained campaign of terror and intimidation against local residents, leading to the propagation of a heavy climate of fear unlike any that Dennis had encountered previously. Feelings and levels of insecurity reached new heights in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, as anybody came to be seen as a source of potential danger, and local inhabitants seemed to have lost all ability to predict patterns of violence. Unexplained shootings became commonplace, including the one Dennis experienced one evening in 2009, as he helped two members of the Gomez family with whom he stays when he's in Nicaragua close down the front of their house. A motorcycle carrying two men suddenly surged out of the night, and the man on the back seat pulled up a shotgun and pointed it at them. As they all threw themselves to the ground screaming, the driver shouted '*no, no, está no, la próxima*' (no, no, not this one, the next one), and they drove on to the next house, into which they shot two rounds, before driving off again. Nobody had any idea who the two men were, or why they had shot into the neighbour's home, but it left everybody involved shaken and on edge in a way that past episodes of gang or drug-related violence had not. Stories of friends and family unexpectedly shooting each other similarly abounded during this period, which inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández recounted to each other suspiciously, and slightly on edge, clearly fearful that they might become the next iteration of such tales if they were not careful.

Similarly to the situation in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in the late 2000s, it is clear that the gang war that broke out in late 2017 in the area of Cape Town where we have carried out our research significantly increased local perceptions and levels of insecurity. By all accounts, the war was connected to a local struggle over drug-selling turfs, and erupted when one of the main drug 'merchants' (dealers) in the area was killed in November 2017. He had controlled drug dealing in one part of the area while two other merchants, a father and son pair, had controlled the other half. While both set of merchants were associated with the same gang, they were connected to different, city-wide drug networks in terms of supply. Until 2017, they had coexisted relatively peacefully, each dominating different areas,

while both supplying different groups of local 'runners' (street dealers). This arrangement came to an end in the latter half of 2017 when the father and the son took over drug dealing inside a newly established squatter settlement in the area, something that led to tension with the other merchant, and ultimately to his killing. The result was an outbreak of generalised violence between different local factions of the gang as they fought over control of drug-selling turfs.

Community activists such as Norma have advocated for better, less corrupt policing in relation to this ongoing gang war, but they have also attempted to facilitate truces between the different factions of the war. This is something that was in many ways a continuation of the fact that Norma and her fellow community workers have long acted as mediators vis-à-vis drugs. When local gangsters and drug addicts acted out of order and robbed or terrorised people in the past, they were the ones who would go and see the local drug merchants in order to get them to discipline their underlings. This was facilitated in some cases by their having intimate, personal relations with them. In one case, a local community activist had had a child with one of the local drug merchants, for example, while in Norma's case, her son Clyde worked for another. The war starkly turned the tables in this respect, as drug dealers began to intentionally target them through their intimate relations. One community activist was forced into complicity as drug dealers had her daughter abducted. In order to save her, she was forced to partake in drug operations, stashing drugs and acting as a runner. Another, who had a drug problem, also became implicated as a runner, in order to maintain a steady supply of drugs for himself.

Such intimate connections introduced significant tensions among the community workers about their relations to the local drug dealers and the associated gang structure. In one incident, Norma was in fact accosted in her house at gunpoint with the father and the son drug merchants demanding that she stash drugs and guns for them. When she refused, her own son undermined her stance by joining their drug operation. It is easy to see why the drug dealers would target and implicate community workers like Norma and her associates. The safety of drug-dealing operations depends to a large extent on the complicity of communities. Norma and her friends wield great influence in the community, and they have important connections to the state, including the police. Forcing community workers onto their side helps secure their operations, in the same way that corrupting police officers does. Anyone thinking of denouncing drug dealers will think twice if they see such intimate police and community collusion. Where would you go? Who could you trust? Norma knows this well. She has experienced on several occasions things that she brought up in meetings with the police or the municipality coming back to haunt her. In one case, she had discussed the problems of drug dealing with a fellow community worker in a taxi. Two days later, the drug dealer confronted Norma about this discussion. Such issues spilled over beyond the local community, as Norma explained to us during our interview on 22 May 2019, talking about a meeting that she and another community worker had had with district police commanders: 'now you feel like safe because you've got all these big guys in the meeting. So, we talk, we talk. Then later [another community worker] calls me and says to me, 'hey [the drug dealer] says that meeting [you] were in about gangsters and things was discussed'. So immediately, my mind clicked. Because there was no one else, it must have been the police that gave out all the information.'

Norma, in other words, has to walk a moral tight rope between her son, the community, the police and drug dealers. On the one hand, these tensions can be related more broadly

to the distinction that Ross (2015) makes between *'rouheid'* (rawness) and *'ordentlikheid'* (respectability) in relation to navigating the dilemmas of everyday life in Cape Town townships. On the other hand, Norma's complicity, as well as that of her associates, is enforced through violent threats – both actual and implicit – the power of which at least partly emanates from their intimate nature. While all of the local community activists found drug dealing and consumption deeply problematic, and tried to find ways of minimising and mitigating the harmful presence of the drug dealers, not least in relation to the accompanying violence from the drug war, their various intimate entanglements with drugs and drug dealers made it difficult. Seen through the conceptual lens of 'governing intimacy' (Oswin and Olund 2010), we see how both state and gang drug-related violence are folded into intimate, communal relations.

Cultural intimacy

These intimate entanglements existed alongside particular ideas that Norma and her associates held about the relationship between the community and the drug dealers, which conformed to collective models of the 'virtuous' drug dealer fundamentally grounded in a particular connection with the local community (see Jensen 2000). These notions and ideas of what drug dealing should entail for communal relations resonate with Herzfeld's (2014) notion of 'cultural intimacy'. The drug dealer who was killed in November 2017 was perceived as honouring those models. While he was selling drugs, he was helpful to the community both financially and in relation to disciplining his underlings. This was much more ambiguously the case of the father and son drug merchants, who were moreover reputed to be extremely and viciously brutal. This did not stop Norma from going to see them when their runners robbed residents or behaved violently in the community. However, it was clearly a difficult choice, both because it would cement the embedded nature of community work and drug dealing, and because of their brutality. During our interview with her on 22 May 2019 Norma told us of an incident where she had gone to see them about one of their runners who had allegedly stolen money from a local community inhabitant. As a result of her reporting, the father drug merchant had ordered him to be beaten: '[The father] was not rude to me. He just talked to the guys in the yard. He even asked me if I want to watch them hit [him]. I always say no [to that]. I've seen it one time and I said, no. Because they do it brutally. While you get out of there, you can't walk, you can barely breathe...'. While Norma recognised that this runner had often caused mischief, and needed to be disciplined, the brutality of the act made her fearful.

Norma interpreted the incident as highlighting how the drug dealers were clearly more interested in running their violent business than helping the community. During our interview with her on 22 May 2019, she told us 'they don't care actually about the community or things like that' and intimated that the result was a loss of 'control'. Steffen probed her on this, asking 'so you were saying that they are not helping the community anymore. But what has been the change, how did you lose control?'

'They have a hold on them', Norma initially answered, alluding to the case of the community activist whose daughter was abducted, before then going on to say, 'in my mind, the difference ... is like the other day ... we were making the food [following a shack fire

that had devastated the house of several community members]. [The father] came in and ... I told [another community worker], 'you ask him for bread, we need bread. He said to [her], 'I will see what I can do. But he never returned with the bread. Whereas he has money That is the difference.'

'But in their mind that is helping the community, keeping their guys in control?' Steffen suggested.

To which Norma replied: '[Perhaps] in their minds they are helping the community. [But] they say you mustn't take from the community that is helping us ... I hear they always say, "You mustn't take from the community that is helping us"'. Clearly, she did not think that was the case.

Norma worked and understood her position in relation to a culturally intimate model of how drug dealers should behave as members of the community. This is, in a sense, part of a mode of accommodation where drug dealers care for the community in return for community complicity – for instance, by not informing on the drug dealers. As also noted by Arias (2006) in his analysis of violent social networks in Rio de Janeiro, it was clear, however, that she felt drawn into drug-dealing networks against her will. Implicating community workers was part of a strategy on the part of the drug dealers to protect their drug dealing, and it relied heavily on drug dealing being embedded in communal action in ways that created almost irreconcilable dilemmas for individuals such as Norma, due to both her personal and communal connections. As such, she incarnates many of the contradictions of life in South African townships marked by poverty, violence and drugs, where these different forces become entangled in extremely intricate and intimate ways. She felt deeply resentful of the drug dealers and sought to mitigate the consequences of their business as best she could, but she also realised that they were part of the world she lived in. In many ways, the situation she described was comparable with that studied by Auyero and Berti (2015, 106) in the poor neighbourhood of *Arquitecto Tucci* in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where 'different forms of violence not only co-exist ... but also interlink with one another. In doing so, the boundaries between street and home, between public and domestic, become blurred'.

These emic understandings of social relations as embedded in cultural intimacy are also obvious in relation to an interview that we carried out together on 10 February 2020 with Bismarck, one of Dennis' key informants in *barrío* Luis Fanor Hernández. Dennis has had an ongoing relationship with Bismarck for almost 25 years and he has interviewed Bismarck every time he has visited Nicaragua, tracing the longitudinal evolution of his life, from gang member in the 1990s to *púsher* (drug dealer) in the 2000s to legal entrepreneur in the early 2010s (see Rodgers 2016). He is one of the few drug dealers in *barrío* Luis Fanor Hernández who managed to sustainably transfer the material profit of his dealing into more legal assets, namely property, and for a while was one of the richest men in the neighbourhood, although he subsequently lost most of his fortune for extraneous reasons. The objective of the interview with Bismarck was to allow Steffen to ask him questions against his South African experiences, but it very rapidly became much more about Dennis explaining to Steffen the rationalities underlying Bismarck's narrative that he took for granted. These were largely based on a series of culturally intimate notions of how to behave that intersected directly with drug dealing, as became clear in relation to an episode concerning Bismarck's daughter.

Bismarck is married to Wanda, and they have two children together, Lisette and Ramses, born in 2000 and 2003, respectively. After Lisette finished high school in late 2017, Bismarck

funded her to study dentistry at a private university, but she dropped out after falling pregnant and giving birth to a baby boy called Selim in early 2019. Bismarck and Wanda had been rather cagey about telling Dennis who Selim's father was, but he learnt shortly after arriving in Nicaragua in early February 2020, a few days prior to Steffen's arrival for their bout of joint research, that he was a member of the *Perros Locos* drug-dealing group from the neighbouring *barrio* Nosara. This came as a significant surprise because Bismarck had had a long-running *traido*, or vendetta/feud, with them, something that had translated into numerous episodes of cyclical violence over the course of the past decade and a half. The apparent contradiction was something that we decided to tackle head on with Bismarck during an interview on 10 February 2020:

Dennis: 'So, let's begin with your telling us how you've been, perhaps? I mean, last time I saw you, in 2016, you were a young father, with a wife and two teenage kids, and now you're a grandfather! How did that happen?'

Bismarck: 'Well, you know, life ...'

Dennis: 'Sure, but I've been told that the father of your grandchild Selim is a *Perro Loco*, and you had a *traido* (personal vendetta) with them, so what gives?'

Bismarck hesitated a little before shrugging, and saying '*asi es* (that's how it is) When I was first told that Lisette was with child, pregnant, I was angry, I could have thrown her out on the *calle* (street), I could have told her "stay in the *calle* with the father of your child," but then I started thinking how I was a father myself. I couldn't leave her in the *calle*. I know the *calle*. I know what it's like to *andar de vago* (be delinquent) in the *calle*, to sleep in the *calle*, to take drugs, to rob, to fight ... I didn't want her to suffer like I did, so I decided to support her But it was hard, you know, because the person who did that to her is an enemy of mine, somebody with whom I had a *traido*. I wondered whether he'd got her pregnant por *venganza* (vengeance), which made me angry with him and with her, but then I thought that if I threw her back into the *calle*, I'd also be throwing out an innocent person, my grandson, a child that bore no responsibility in the error of his parents, of two adolescents So, I decided to take responsibility for the child.'

Dennis: 'Well, that's really big of you, Bismarck, but there's something I don't understand here, a *traido* is personal, isn't it? I mean, you can't have had a *traido* with Selim's father because he's too young, he's what, 19–20, like Lisette, no?'

Bismarck: 'He's 26, but it's true, my *traido* was with his older brothers, especially a guy called Davy, but even when he was 15–16, when I was fighting with his brothers, he'd still come and fuck about in the *barrio*, he was a real little snot then, so I had issues with him too. Once he came and shot at my house, and we had a *tiroteo* (shoot out).'

Dennis: 'But didn't Lisette know about your *traido* with his family?'

Bismarck: 'Of course she did, that's why she saw him in secret.'

Dennis: 'Do you know how they met?'

Bismarck: 'Social media, I think, because he wouldn't have been able to come to the *barrio*, he wouldn't have had the balls to come, he's been a scared little shit all his life...'

Dennis: 'But now he's able to come?'

Bismarck: 'Well, he's never come, because he's scared of me, but his mother came once to talk to me. She came to talk to me, and to Lisette, at a birthday party on the next block. She said that her son wanted to come and see the kid, if I gave him permission, she said that he'd changed, that he was no longer a *vago*'.

Dennis: 'And what did you say to her?'

'Bismarck: I said to her, "Look, *señora*, I'm going to be frank and honest with you, for me your son is not good enough for my daughter. But they've done what they've done. I'm not an aggressive person, I don't want problems, but your son is a *narcotraficante* (drug dealer), like all your children, *señora*, and I'm not going to let anybody harm me".

Dennis: 'But you weren't exactly a saint before, Bismarck!'

Bismarck: 'Sure, but I've changed, my life has changed, I have an honest job now, my life is dedicated to working hard, to putting food on my table, for my family. If I'd been a bad father, I'd have thrown Lisette back in the *calle*, but no, I'm taking responsibility for her and her irresponsibility'.

Steffen then weighed in, saying, 'OK, so the father doesn't see his kid, but does he at least contribute something to his maintenance?'. Bismarck hesitated before replying, in a slightly embarrassed manner, 'Ehhh, no No, because I don't permit him to do so, I don't want to have anything to do with his *dinero sucio* (dirty money), nor do I want to be associated with him and his family, they're *gente sucia* (dirty people), involved in bad things. You know that my record with the police isn't good. Even if I've left the delinquent life behind me, it took years before the police stopped come round, and just by being associated with – even just walking down the same street with them! – those people, it would cause me problems'.

Steffen: 'And how does Lisette react to this?'

Bismarck: 'Hmmm ... she doesn't like it, but she also feels bad for having put me in this situation. Because of her I'm having to go through something that I thought I'd left behind me, and I'm having to *poner huevos* (bust my ass off) to support her. I'd hoped to be able to support her going to university or something, not this. Or that if she fell pregnant, that it would be with a different type of person, one who would support her. I'm having to assume responsibility for her errors'.

Dennis: 'Has she ever said sorry?'

Bismarck: 'No, just like she's never told me what happened either. All she's said is that she feels bad that I have to support her, especially as he's a *narco*, he's rich, he sells a lot of drugs, he has money, and he could support her, but I don't want to get into this ...!'

Dennis: 'What is the most important reason why you're refusing his help? Is it your *traido* with his family or is it because he's a *narco*?'

Bismarck: 'Both. If he or his family were honourable, it would be different, but they're *gente sucia*, and they're the worse kind of *narcos*. You know how the drugs trade has evolved *de manera viciosa* (viciously) over the past 10 years, it's not like it was before, the *narcos* are all nasty, dangerous people today ...!'

Although Bismarck claimed that he did not want to have anything to do with Selim's father, it later turned out that he had not been completely truthful, however. In the evening on 24 February 2020, Dennis was sitting with Bismarck, Wanda, and other members of the Gomez family when they began talking about and comparing photos of Selim with those

of two other children, whom they said were half-siblings that his father had had with two other local women. It was striking that Bismarck participated actively in the conversation, making comments on the common features shared by the three children, and he ended up showing us a set of photos and videos of Selim's dad at his and Wanda's place, meeting Selim for the first time. Bismarck and Wanda clearly looked very happy, laughing and joking with Selim's dad, something that not only contradicted Bismarck's claim during our previous interview that he had never visited them, but also put his critiques in a different light. Interestingly, during the course of the conversation, it was casually mentioned that one of Selim's uncles was a person called Salomón, who in the late 2000s had been the right-hand man of *el Indio Viejo*, the big *narco* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in the 2000s, with whom Bismarck had collaborated in the early 2000s, and who was a cousin of Bismarck's wife Wanda. Seen from this perspective, just as was the case in South Africa, it is clear that drug dealing in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández is fundamentally embedded within everyday life, conditioning it and being conditioned by it, both in the past and in the present. Bismarck's reasoning followed a set of culturally intimate notions, reconciling morality, everyday life and ideas about the future. While this – to some extent – led to him to act in an economically counterproductive manner, his actions were intelligible to Wanda and Lisette, as they confirmed in an interview that we carried out with them on 13 February 2020, where they prosaically discussed Selim, Lisette's relationship with his father, and Bismarck's reaction as forgiven.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how and to what extent it is useful to think about drug dealing through the concept of intimacy. We explored the intimacies of drug dealing along three axes: the involvement of kin and family, the intimate governance of drug dealing, and drug dealing as embedded in culturally intimate models and ideas. Drawing on our collaborative ethnographic research in Nicaragua and South Africa, we illustrated first how family and kin were implicated in drug dealing, both voluntarily and against their will. We then exemplified several instances of what Oswin and Olund (2010) have labelled 'governing intimacy', exploring how drug dealing institutes or produces particular forms of order, often entangled with state and policing governance. Drug dealing becomes embedded in social relations as a result, folding itself into communal and family relations. Finally, evoking Herzfeld's (2014) notion of 'cultural intimacy', we explored the extent to which drug dealing entered into local notions and rationalities, from models of how to be a 'good' drug dealer to how one's daughter should conduct her love life.

We are obviously not the first to identify social embeddedness as central to understanding the nature of drug dealing. Venkatesh (1997, 2000, 2006), for example, explored the social relations surrounding drug dealing in a Chicago housing estate, while Bourgois (1995) highlighted how drug dealers were caught in a range of different relationships in a New York neighbourhood. More broadly, Chomczyński, Guy, and Cortina-Cortés (2019) have investigated the way that drug dealing is entangled with other informal economic activities in a commercial neighbourhood in Mexico City, while in his study of drug dealing in Brazil, Arias (2006) discussed the importance of patron–client networks and social orders. Finally, Das, Ellen, and Leonard (2008), as well as Goodfellow (2008), have explored how drug consumption brings prisons and the state deep into domestic life.

Our article inscribes itself within, and builds on, this line of work, but does so in a way that explicitly foregrounds different levels of intimacy. One potential danger of such an approach is that the focus on intimacy may privilege or relocate our understanding of drug dealing to the domain of friends, kinship or family. However, we have proposed a notion of intimacy that does not reduce it to being about just friends, family or kinship, but rather conceives of it as something more expansive, that imbues local community and moral governing structures. This allows for a more holistic vision of drug dealing that transcends monolithic representations. As a result, our research suggests that drug dealing is more likely to be an *'ad hoc ... decentralized distribution system'* rather than some form of *'coherent, formal, or lasting organization'* (Decker and van Winkle 1994, 588). It also suggests that *'drug trafficking ... is embedded in social relationships and inseparable from the daily rhythms of everyday life'* (Muehlmann 2014, 182–183). The latter observation is important because it raises questions regarding whether intimacy is instrumental or contingent. By this we mean whether intimacy is purposefully built upon, or whether it is a side effect. Our research suggests that drug dealers do seem to strive to implicate, in intimate ways, family and community organisations. However, while drug dealers try to implicate intimate relations, these relations have a life of their own that may, in some cases, lead to the formulation of critiques of drug-dealing networks as well. This is not least the case in relation to discussions about culturally shared notions of intimacy. In this way, intimacy cannot be reduced to a function of drug dealing. While drug dealing may be organised along intimate lines as well as animate them, intimacy will also animate drug dealing and even provide a language of opposition or dissent.

More generally, foregrounding intimacy also allows us to appreciate the importance of gender relations in drug dealing anew. Frequently, drug dealing is depicted and understood as a predominantly male enterprise. There is little doubt that men make up the majority of both bulk and street-level dealers, and that *'wars on drugs'* primarily target and imprison (young) men. Gangs are, furthermore, predominantly (although by no means exclusively) masculine spaces, in which women are often relegated to a status of victim or peripheral *'hangers on'*. Yet the work of Campbell (2008), Miller (2001), Moore (1991) or Muehlmann (2014) highlights how such gendered representations are overly simplistic. We clearly need to pay more attention to the specific ways in which gender animates drug dealing, as well as how drug dealing articulates and perpetuates particular gendered norms and structures.

A focus on intimacy, however, allows us to do so in a way that transcends a critical epistemological blind spot frequently associated with the study of drug dealing. Hume (2009, 4) summarises this well – albeit in relation to studies of violence more generally – when she points out that all too often analyses are *'heavily reliant on an exclusively public reading of security. ... This approach [constitutes] ... an incomplete analysis of violence, ignoring important linkages between violence in the home and violence in the street'*. Certainly, as Wilding (2014, 237) has highlighted, *'men do not operate in isolation from their ties and relationships with women, but rather women and girls play a range of emotional and practical roles, as carers and facilitators, protectors, victims and perpetrators'*. This is something that our research bears out in both Cape Town and Managua, but it is also important more broadly. Drawing on feminist critiques of economic epistemology (Beneria 1979; Molyneux 1979), our focus on intimacy also lays bare the fact that most research on drug dealing only focuses on *'production'* – the drug merchants, the street-level dealers – or *'consumption'*

– addicts – and misses out on ‘reproduction’ – or, in other words, how drug dealing is perpetuated through fundamentally gendered and socially embedded processes.

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Notes

1. This name is a pseudonym, as are all the other names of individuals and places mentioned in this article.
2. We refer to these two areas in a generic and anonymous manner for security and ethical reasons.
3. See for example Jensen (2008, 2010, 2014) and Rodgers (2006, 2015, 2017a).
4. The ‘Gangs, Gangsters and Ganglands: Towards a Global Comparative Ethnography’ project, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 787935).
5. The fieldwork in the two sites tapped into longstanding networks. Apart from engaging in participant observation and having multiple informal conversations, we formally interviewed 22 informants in Cape Town, and 15 in Nicaragua. These were either individuals whom we had individually interviewed repeatedly over the years, or people that trusted networks referred to

us. Along the lines of our ethical clearances for the overall project as well as the local ethical clearances obtained for the two respective sites, we also ensured that new interlocutors actively provided us with informed consent through conversations about the project and their role in it. This was particularly important given that our long histories in the respective sites can sometimes obscure the need to explicitly obtain permissions.

6. All Spanish and Afrikaans terms have been translated by the authors.
7. 'Tik' is the local Cape Town term for crystal methamphetamine. 'Buttons' refers to methaqualone, also known as 'Mandrax'.

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