

'Narcoballads': The Psychology and Recruitment Process of the 'Narco'

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There have been several studies conducted about racist groups, gangs, cults, terrorist and other criminal organisations, but very little has been written about the psychology and recruitment process of the 'narcotrafficker'. This is because like most criminal organisations, they tend to be secretive and difficult to penetrate by law enforcement, academics and others who wish to study them. Using an audio-recorded content analysis of 'narcocorridos' – ballads glorifying the activities of the 'narcos' and describing their successes' – as well as Social Identity and Group theories, the author describes some of the techniques used to recruit individuals into drug cartels; the labels, stereotypes and images of the in-group versus the out-group and the similarities in the socialisation and recruitment process of other criminal organisations. This study shows the recruitment of individuals into drug cartels follow similar patterns to other criminal organisations including the need for power, belonging, respect, security and pride.

Keywords narcotrafficker; narcocorrido; narcoballads; social identity theory; group theory; drug cartels; in-group-out-group

The lavish way drug dealers show off their wealth in the communities in which they live - and the way they are celebrated in such popular entertainments as the 'narcocorrido' ballads - ignites hopes and dreams among younger, adventurous and more ambitious members of society. Particularly if they have no education or technical skills, they soon realise that the American dream will take them a lifetime to accomplish and they are neither able, nor willing to wait to cultivate the tools necessary to accomplish these goals through legitimate means. A lack of access to education, jobs, mentors and strong community leaders advocating

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alternative lifepaths makes these community members more vulnerable to recruitment into drug cartels and other criminal organisations.

As scholars, before we can design and implement strategies to prevent the recruitment of new members into these criminal organisations, it is important that we understand the psychological reasoning by which its members decide to join. For this reason, in a content analysis of the ballad form known as 'narcocorrido', I use the work of Frederick J. Desroches¹ as well as Social Identity and Group theories to make a preliminary attempt to describe the psychological factors that contribute to the recruitment process of individuals into drug-smuggling organisations. 'Narcocorridos' are a form of storytelling that has been passed on from generation to generation and while they may not be strictly based on facts, the stories are based on real events and gives us an insight into the minds of drug traffickers.²

Social Identity Theory and the Recruitment Process of the 'Narco'

Social Identity theory argues that we classify ourselves as well as others into in-groups and out-groups. This theory is summarised in three principles; the first point argues that group members will strive to achieve or maintain a sense of positive social identity.³ Second, group members will base this social identity on favourable comparisons that can be made between in-groups and relevant out-groups. In order to accomplish this improved sense of social identity, groups will create a favourable distinction and a positive sense of self so that they can compare their in-group with other out-groups. Finally, group members will attempt to leave their groups or join a more positively distinct group when their present social identity is not satisfactory to them.

In Western societies, the consumption and immediate gratification of material goods are generally viewed as a symbol of success, as a result, there is a tremendous pressure from friends, neighbours and the media to achieve this material wealth and individuals who join drug smuggling organisations do so in part because of impersonal coercion; meaning that legitimate opportunities to achieve this immediate goals have been blocked.⁴ This group has chosen a creative way to achieve this wealth: joining a criminal organisation. By doing so, they are effectively disassociating themselves from their previous group, where they experience economic deprivation, to join a new group of higher status where material wealth is perceived to be abundant. Currently, many young adults in

1. Desroches, F.J. (2005) *The Crime that Pays; Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime in Canada*, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc, Toronto.

2. Edberg, M.C. (2004) *El Narcotraficante; Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the US-Mexico Border*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, p. 74.

3. For a more detailed description of Social Identity Theory see, Tajfel, H. & John, T. 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict', in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. Austin et al., Brooks-Cole, Belmont, CA.

4. Colvin, M. (2000) *Crime and Coercion*, St. Martin's Press, New York, p. 20.

society regard low-paying jobs as shameful and in order to improve their self image, they will take the risk of getting caught selling drugs, rather than continue to work at low-paying jobs that are viewed by their friends and society as demeaning and humiliating. Individuals who join drug-trafficking organisations are not satisfied with their present group status and in order to achieve this sense of positive self, they have made a conscious decision to join a different group, despite the ethical and legal implications that this new membership may bring.

In Social Identity Theory there are three ways in which individuals react to negative or threaten social identity and one is by disassociating themselves from their current group and joining one of higher status.⁵ Those who join drug trafficking organisations have fallen into the trap of measuring success through how much material wealth an individual can acquire. Individuals who are willing to join these organisations do so either to maintain the standard of living after a business failure or because they want the economic rewards including the flamboyant lifestyle and high status that these illegal activities can provide.⁶ In order to see themselves in a more positively distinct group, they must acquire these goods, even at the risk of getting apprehended and prosecuted. Once these rewards begin to materialise, these individuals have effectively left their old group to become part of a more positively distinct group that fits their perceived notion of an improved self identity. Once this has occurred, these individuals will begin to identify themselves with their newly-adopted group and begin to see their previous group as the out-group.

In the mind of the drug smuggler, this comparison is relevant because if they were able to make the transition to gain membership in their newly adopted group, others (those suffering poverty and economic hardships) can also do the same if they made a decision to take some risks. Additionally, with their newly acquired membership comes a new out-group that previously was considered part of their in-group. For example, their neighbours, law enforcement officers and even family members (who oppose their activities) all of a sudden become an out-group because membership in a drug smuggling organisation requires secrecy and deception in order to succeed in their business and avoid apprehension and prosecution by law enforcement.

Once individuals have joined drug trafficking organisations, they may experience a type of negative social identity due to the illegality of their new profession. However, according to social identity theory, individuals will cope with this new threat through social creativity, which includes three strategies to neutralise this threat. First, there is an attempt to compare the in-group with the out-group on a different dimension. For example, drug traffickers will compare themselves to legitimate business organisations by claiming that they are participating in a process whereby individuals freely exchange goods and service

5. Tajfel & John 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict'.

6. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*; also Jensen, E.L. (1996) 'The Civil Forfeiture of Assets and the War on Drugs: expanding criminal sanctions while reducing due process protections' *Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 42, no. 3, p. 421.

without the use of violence. In other words, they are simply supplying a product that consumers want and they are not forcing anyone to consume or to take drugs.⁷ Second, individuals who are attempting to enhance their image through social creativity will re-evaluate the comparison, such that previously negative dimensions are perceived as positive. For example, individuals who have joined drug trafficking organisations will cope with the negative stigma of being considered a criminal by comparing themselves to even more extreme criminals, such as bank robbers or gang members. It is common for drug traffickers to use comments such as 'well, at least I do not steal from people, I make my own money from goods that me and my customers freely exchange, except that these goods happen to be outlawed by the government'. The third strategy that individuals who use social creativity to enhance their social image will do is to compare their own in-group to a different or lower status group. A member of a drug smuggling organisation will compare themselves to individuals who are conformist and who have allowed themselves and their families to suffer the hardships of poverty and deprivation. Their new profession may be illegitimate, but they claim that at least their families will no longer suffer poverty and their children will have a brighter future as a result of their decisions.

A final strategy by which groups or individuals will attempt to cope with a threatened or negative social identity is social competition. Individuals who use this strategy will compete with the out-group to attain positive distinctiveness or positive social identity. However, joining a new group to enhance social identity will depend on the permeability of the group boundaries, which in turn will influence the type of strategies that individuals will use to gain acceptance or membership into this new group.⁸ The permeability of drug trafficking organisations will depend on the type of background or environment from which the members who are seeking membership come. Their ethnic or racial background can be an advantage or disadvantage and will determine the likelihood of being admitted into this new group. For example, an individual with an Anglo Saxon background has little to no possibility of being admitted into a drug smuggling organisation whose membership is mostly of Latin American descent without contacts or knowledge of their culture, customs and values. This is one of the main factors hindering law enforcement and intelligence agencies in their efforts to gather information and dismantle drug gangs and terrorists networks. For those seeking membership in this new group who are of the 'right' ethnic or racial background, the permeability, its profitability and its low market barriers are difficult to resist, even after assessing the risks of apprehension and prosecution. Indeed, those who get apprehended and sent to prison may use this opportunity to gather intelligence on potential suppliers and distributors, allowing them to form

7. Frederick Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*.

8. Ellemers, N., Van, K. A. & Wilke, H. (1990) 'The Influence of Permeability of Group Boundaries and Stability of Group Status on Strategies of Individual Mobility and Social Change', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 29, pp. 233-246.

networks that permit them to continue their drug smuggling operations in a more profitable manner than before they were incarcerated.⁹

According to social identity theory, the more an in-group experiences perceptions of threat, the more the out-group is viewed as threatening, homogeneous and extreme.¹⁰ Moreover, when an in-group experiences emotions such as anger towards an out-group, these feelings produce a drive to regain control, remove the obstruction and if necessary attack the source of injury.¹¹ Whether a person or a group acts on his or her anger depends on the situation, norms, values and the characteristics of the out-group. The likelihood of the use of violence among drug traffickers will depend on their reputation and self-image (violent or non-violent), the availability of resources and/or the type of aggression that has been done or attempted against them. Additionally, according to social identity theory, when an in-group experiences disgust towards an out-group; these feelings may evoke extreme actions by the actions or characteristics of the group.¹² This may be an explanation why members of drug gangs (in-group) are willing to use horrendous violence including torture and mutilation against government informants (a definite out-group) when they threaten the existence of their criminal organisations. 'Narcos' dehumanise government informants by referring to them as 'rats' and the torture and murder of Enrique Camarena – a DEA undercover agent who penetrated a Mexican drug cartel - is a clear example of the violence that these criminal organisations are willing to inflict.¹³ The purpose of this violence is to send a clear message on how repulsed they feel by the out-group and to discourage outsiders from threatening the survival of their organisations.

Methodology

I use an audio-recorded content analysis of the 'narcocorrido' – ballads describing the success and worshiping the activities of the 'narco'. This technique will be used because the 'narcocorrido' is a common tool that these criminal organisations use to their advantage in attracting new members. The analysis draws on the collection of tapes and CDs that I have acquired and translated throughout the last 15 years of my life. The 'narcocorridos' selected for this study

9. Frederick Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*.

10. Corneille, O., Yzerbyt, V., Rogier, A. & Buidin, G. (2001) 'Threat and the Group Attribution Error: When Threat Elicits Judgments of Extremity and Homogeneity', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 27, pp. 437-496

11. See Frijda, N. (1986) *The Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; also Izard, C.E. (1977) *Human Emotions*, Plenum, New York; and Lazarus, R.S. (1991) *Emotions and Adaptation*, Oxford University Press, New York.

12. Smith, E. (1993) 'Social Identity and Social Emotions: Toward New Conceptualizations of Prejudice', in *Affect, Cognition, and Stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception*, eds. D. Mckie et al., Academic, York.

13. For a more detail description of this case, see Cottam, M.L. & Cottam, R.W. (2001) *Nationalism and Politics: The Political Behavior of Nations States*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., Colorado, CO, p. 183.

are only a fraction of my collection and in no way represent a systematic sample of 'narcoballads'. However, the 'narcocorridos' included in this paper do give us an insight on the social background, socialisation, motivation, thought process, aspirations, willingness to use violence and general feelings of individuals who are or aspire to become drug traffickers.

The 'narcocorrido' is considered very powerful and effective at enticing individuals to join drug trafficking because its lyrics about glory and riches appeal to the emotions and psyche of the target constituency. Additionally, 'narcocorridos' are a form of storytelling that has been passed on from generation to generation and while they may not be strictly based on facts, the stories are based on real events.¹⁴ According to Edberg, the writing of 'narcocorridos' and the information they provide has become problematic at times in large part because after a 'corrido' had been written about a cartel member or its organisation, its competitors would call and express their disdain by complaining to the producers about the lyrics and inquire why nothing had been written about them. Others would ask the producers to write 'narcocorridos' about them in return for money or expensive gifts.¹⁵ These recorded lyrics at times have created conflict among drug traffickers, not least because they have provided intelligence to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), leading to raids and arrests.¹⁶

Content Analysis of the 'Narcocorrido'



Social Identity theory, individuals within groups are influenced by **effect and emotions—a generic term for a whole range of preferences, evaluations and moods with these emotions being positive or negative.**¹⁷ Emotion is defined as a complex assortment of affects, beyond merely good or bad feelings including delight, serenity, anger, sadness and fear amongst other factors. In the nationalism and holocaust literature there are striking similarities between the propaganda tools that appeal to emotion used by Hitler to unite the populace with those that are used by the 'narcotraffickers' to attract members into their criminal organisations.¹⁸ For example, Hitler used music to generate nationalistic sentiments among his people and was able to unite them under a super-ordinate identity of nationalism. The ability to use tools that appeal to the emotions was extremely powerful, allowing Hitler to exert effective **psychological control over his people. Appealing to the emotions of individuals is one of the main strategies**

14. Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*.

15. Villalobos, J.P. & Ramirez-Pimienta, C.J. (2004) 'Corridos and La Pura Verdad: Myths and Realities of the Mexican Ballad', *South Central Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 136.

16. Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, p. 96.

17. Fiske, S. & Shelly, T. (1991) *Social Cognition*. 2nd Ed., McGraw Hill, New York.

18. See Cottam, M.L. & Cottam, R.W. (2001) *Nationalism and Politics: The Political Behavior of Nations States*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., Colorado, CO; also Newman, L.S. & Erber, R. (eds.) (2002) *Understanding Genocide; The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, New York.



used in the recruitment of members into the drug trade. Among the propaganda tools used to attract members is the 'narcocorrido'. In this case, 'narcocorridos' serve as a tool to manipulate and lure in young, socially marginal and economically dislocated members of society. Getting drunk in the company of woman and friends, attending horse races, cockfights and spending lavishly are common themes in 'narcocorridos' that appeal to the emotions of members who not only come from economically deprived settings, but also those who are from more economically stable groups.

Additionally, cruising the streets across cities, towns and villages in brand-new vehicles, displaying expensive jewellery while playing 'narcoballads' glorifying incarceration, death, vengeance and other forms of violence are also common themes in these songs. Taking front seats in social functions and other engagements as if they were heads of state are also common occurrences that seem to legitimise these individuals as respected members of society. These practices make the recruitment process much easier especially among economically deprived members who desired this quality of life. Gifts from 'narcotraffickers' to the poor and other non-profit organisations also make drug traffickers appear like heroes particularly in poor communities where the government has failed miserably in providing the basic necessities.

Arrest warrants from law enforcement agencies, especially if they come from the DEA or FBI, are also recorded in narcoballads and they also tend to legitimise and boost the popularity of 'narcotraffickers' particularly when efforts to apprehend them fail. The following 'narcocorrido', which begins with the sound of a pager, cellular phone and the voice (in a conversational format) of a drug trafficker's brother, illustrates this point:

"Hermano callo la ley, esta rodeada tu casa. Son puros nervios los tuyos porque yo no he visto nada", así le dije a mi hermano para que hicieran confianza. Sabía que estaba rodeado e interceptaban llamadas. No entraron pronto por mi, para a ver quien mas llegaba, pero se les durmió el gallo me pele en la madrugada. Eran quince hombres del DEA su misión era agarrarme, soy mas astuto que un gato, eso pude comprobarles, cuando ellos van yo ya vengo, también yo fui Comandante. Al ver que nadie llego, dieron la orden para entrar. Cuando tumbaron las puertas, caen Federales para atrás, les coloque unas granadas en una forma especial. Todo fue una confusión por aquellas explosiones. La casa encendida en llamas parecía de día la noche, para ese entonces yo andaba en Ciudad Juárez Señores. No crean que es la primer vez que me les pelo en su cara, me escape de San Quintín, de Corpora y otras jaulas, los espero por la sierra, soy el Gato de Chihuahua.¹⁹

["Brother, the law enforcement has come; your home has been surrounded. It is your paranoia because I have seen nothing," this is what I told my brother so that they would not be suspicious. I knew I was surrounded and phone calls were being intercepted. They did not come in to get me, to see who else would come, but they fell asleep because I escaped early in the morning. It was fifteen men from

19. Los Huracanes del Norte (1997) *30 Norteñas Perronas* [CD], Fonovisa Records, Van Nuys, CA.

the DEA and their mission was to apprehend me. I am smarter than a cat and that I was able to prove, when they are going I am already returning, I too was a Commander. When they realised that no one was coming, the order was given to enter. I strategically set up some grenades, so when the doors were busted, the Feds fell back. Everything was chaos as a result of the explosions. The house was engulfed in flames and the night seemed as if it was the day. Gentleman, by that time, I was already in Ciudad Juárez [a US-Mexico border city known for drug trafficking activity]. Do not think this is the first time I have escaped in their presence, I have escaped from San Quentin, from Corpora and other cages, I will be waiting for them in the mountains, I am the Cat of Chihuahua.]

The law-enforcement failures recorded in these songs, accompanied by special effects of helicopters, ambulances, gun shots and explosions, portray 'narcos' as intelligent, with a sense of superiority and overconfidence. The ballads also present the drug traffickers as users of advanced technology such as cell-phones, computers, airplanes, GPS, armoured vehicles and encryption, and deploying sophisticated weaponry such as rocket-propelled grenades and machineguns to take down helicopters sent to capture them or eradicate their drug plantations. The following is an excerpt from a 'narcocorrido' that illustrates these themes:

Hemos derribado aviones que nos han caído al campo a quemarnos los plantíos donde sale el polvo blanco con bazucas y metrallas los hemos mandado al Diablo.

Les hemos pasado enfrente con los tanques de ellos mismos donde llevamos la droga para enyerbar al los gringos para que se vuelvan locos y no sepan de ellos mismos. Mi gente anda bien armada la que traigo por los cerros, las armas yo se las mando en cortinas de becerros, el gobierno ni las huele, piensa que yo vendo cuero.²⁰

[We have taken down the airplanes that have come down upon the field to burn our plantation where the white powder comes from, with rocket-propelled grenades and machineguns we have sent them to the devil.

We have passed through in front of them with their own tanks where we ship the drugs to poison the 'gringos' so that they become crazy and lose a sense of who they are.]

This propaganda is very effective at creating misperceptions among rural Mexican farmers that 'narcos' are invincible, with an economic and political clout that disenfranchised members of society naturally find it difficult to resist. The names of several states such as Michoacán, Jalisco, Sinaloa, Durango, Tijuana, and Chihuahua are also mentioned in 'narcoballads' in attempts to place their states higher in status regarding the amount and quality of drugs they can smuggle into the United States. As a result of this propaganda any individuals who want to enhance their social image and gain legitimacy within drug trafficking circles will claim to be from certain states that have the reputation of producing and shipping larger quantities of drugs to the United States. Escapes from prison and paying

20. Los Centenarios *Hasta Mi Tumba* [CD].

government officials to let drug shipments through are also common themes in 'narcocorridos'. These are illustrated in the following 'corrido':

Con el permiso de todos, voy a empezar a cantar, para contarles los hechos de un Agente Federal que fue Cuauhtémoc Miranda, lo mato un Cabo Aduanal. En la garita de Ochoa, municipio de Camargo, estaban los veladores su cardo desempeñando cuando llego un Federal por el Jefe preguntando. El Cabo Polo De Arrean, voz de mando en el servicio, le pregunto muy seguro "¿que se le ofrece mi amigo? Soy el oficial en un turno para servirle le dijo. Soy Agente Federal" Contesto muy altanero "y quiero notificarle del contrabando que llevo, van a pasar dos camiones, diles a tus compañeros". Como los hombres derechos el Cabo le respondió, "así no puedes pasarte. ¿En que papel quedo yo? Acuérdate que a los hombres nos justifica el honor". El Agente muy liviano desenfundo en un momento, pero el Cabo de la Aduana dicen que fue mas violento, siete veces disparo y el Agente callo muerto.²¹

[With everyone's permission, I will begin singing, to tell you the deeds of a Federal Agent whose name was Cuauhtémoc Miranda, killed by a Customs Corporal. In the check point of Ochoa, County of Camargo, the night guards were conducting their duties when a Federal Agent arrived, asking for the boss. The Corporal, Polo De Arrean, distinguished member of the service, asked him very confidently, "what can I do for you my friend?; I am the official in charge for this shift at your service." "I am a Federal Agent" he answered arrogantly "and I would like to notify you of the contraband that I am carrying; tell your subordinates that two trucks will be coming through." Like a man of honour, the Corporal answered; "you cannot pass through with this load, if you do, this will mean that I am not performing my duties. You must remember that honour makes a man". The agent rapidly drew, but the Customs Corporal is said to have been more violent, firing seven shots and the Agent dropped dead.]

The messages in these songs seem to suggest that it is not uncommon for law enforcement agents to be involved in the drug trade, which leads people to believe (with reason) that corruption is rampant and they should be vigilant when dealing with their government. When the Agent arrives at the checkpoint demanding to be let through with his shipment, this gives the listening audience a glimpse of the overt corruption in existence and what may happened to those officers who may not be willing to be corrupted. In this particular 'narcocorrido' the uncorrupted Mexican officer gets the upper hand, but this sends a message to other law enforcement officers that if they intend to resist corruption by drug traffickers they must be willing to kill or be killed.

'Narcocorridos' and Optimism

Members of powerful cartels are idealised to the point of making them immortal. For example, after Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the head of the Juarez Cartel, died in July of 1997 from an overdose of anaesthesia while undergoing plastic surgery,

21. Banda Limón (1999) *Corridos Arrolladores II* [CD], La Sierra Records, USA.

conspiracy theories abounded in 'narcocorridos' as well as by word of mouth among drug smuggling circles that that he was still alive. Carrillo was known as "El Señor de los Cielos" or "Lord of the Skies" due to his practice of chartering Boeing 727s to ship Colombian cocaine to his bases in northern Mexico.²² These types of rumours and conspiracy theories help create a world of fantasy for current and future members of drug cartels that keeps them motivated, clinging to a false sense of security. This sense of invulnerability that 'narcocorridos' depicts makes 'narcotraffickers' remain highly optimistic. These songs create a belief that if they hang on a little longer, a much brighter future awaits them. This thought process and attitude towards life is a continuous cycle that remains with them throughout their lives regardless of the setbacks they may experience. Apart from greed, the illusion of a heroic figure the 'narcocorrido' creates in the minds of their members may be among the reasons why it is difficult for individuals who have joined drug cartels to abandon their trade.

'Narcocorridos' are to 'narcotraffickers' what memoirs are to politicians. This propaganda has been so influential in recruiting individuals into the drug trade, inciting instability through the use of violence, intimidation and corruption, that several radio stations in Sinaloa, Baja California and other northern Mexican states have agreed on banning 'narcocorridos' that glorify violence. This ban came days after an apparently drug-related massacre left 12 people dead in the Sinaloan village of El Limoncito in which males of all ages were lined up by masked visitors and gunned down with automatic weapons.²³ Musical groups that played this type of music have a large following in central and northern Mexican states as well as in large cities in the U.S. including Chicago, Los Angeles, Huston, El Paso and other states where high concentrations of Mexican and Latin American immigrant communities reside.

There exist striking similarities **in the message of the** 'narcocorrido' and those of rock musicians recruited by racist groups to play at concerts and rallies promoting the use of violence against non-whites. However, unlike racist groups whose leaders attempt to recruit members for their organisations in concerts or rallies, no such group dynamic develops with 'narcotraffickers'. There are no Pablo Escobars or Amado Carrillo Fuentes out publicly recruiting members to work for their cartels. Individuals who want to join drug trafficking organisations do so through other channels than concerts or public settings. Musical groups who play 'Narcocorrido' play not only for those who seek to join drug cartels; to the contrary, the majority of their business comes from law-abiding citizens. The popularity of the 'narcoballad' is due to the simplicity in the musical arrangement, easy dancing rhythm style and their ability to tell stories of characters who have risen from rags to riches. These are among the reasons why there exists such high demand for these lyrics and millions of copies are sold and

22. Bitter Flows the Rio Grande Mexico and US Clash in Search for Victims of Drug Cartels (1999) *The Guardian*, 16 December.

23. *The Christian Science Monitor*: Available at: main page, <http://csmonitor.com/cgi-bin/durableRedirect.pl?durable/2001/03/08/p8s1.htm> (accessed 20 November 2003)

bought independently for the enjoyment of both law-abiding citizens and drug traffickers alike.

Most drug-smuggling organisations do not operate in a hierarchical manner with a centralised command system like the Mafia stereotype where everyone involved had to answer to 'the Boss'.²⁴ Even though drug trafficking organisations are connected loosely to their suppliers in source countries and have to pay for the merchandise, most of them work independently at the local level and act as a type of independent contractor who is responsible for the goods once they have been delivered to them. This type of organisational style helps insulates its members from the threat of violence, apprehension and prosecution.

'Narcotraffickers' also create new identities for themselves, not only by adopting nicknames such as the Scorpion, The Cat and The Panther, but also by purchasing fake birth certificates or legally changing their names several times throughout their lives.²⁵ The adoption of animal nicknames common in 'narcocorridos' seems to suggest the type of agility, ferocity and speed with which drug traffickers can act when they are threatened and/or conducting their drug smuggling operations. 'Narcotraffickers' are also known to submit to surgery to erase their fingerprints and plastic surgery to change their physical appearance to avoid being identified by their rivals or capture by law enforcement. This is not unique to drug traffickers - for example, as detailed in his autobiography, the Los Angeles gang member Kody Scott assumed the name Monster Kody, and just as he then had to live up to his name by using violence,²⁶ drug traffickers also use violence both reflecting and building their reputation as criminal organisations. These adopted identities allow drug traffickers to detach themselves from the acts of violence they have committed against others; making it easier for them to cope with the psychological drawbacks resulting from these activities.

In addition to worrying about devising strategies to deceive law enforcement, drug traffickers also have to contend with competitors as well as enemies they have created in their ascend to power and their willingness to use violence against their organisations. Moreover, clients and associates may rob them, others get apprehended and their drug shipments intercepted by law enforcement. For these reasons, drug traffickers suffer from stress, anxiety, and paranoia, similar to members of terrorist groups, gangs and other group members of society with position of high stress including CIA spies and military personnel. Even though, this may seem contradictory, higher level drug traffickers tend to live the lives of law-abiding citizens with conventional values including being religious and family-oriented.²⁷

24. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*, p. 37

25. See Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*, p. 103, also Moran, L.K. (2005) *Blowing my Cover*, Penguin Group, New York.

26. Shakur, S. (1993) *Monster Kody; The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member*, Grove Press, New York.

27. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*

The Behaviour of 'Narcotraffickers' as a Group

According to some scholars, even though most social psychologists define a group as a collection of people who are perceived to belong together and are dependent on one another, there are other ways to conceptualise groups.²⁸ Since the beginning of times, humans as well as animals have gathered in groups for practical reasons including survival needs such as feeding, defence, nurture, and reproduction.²⁹ Groups form because they fulfil certain needs for individual members. According to this functional perspective, individuals join groups for the social benefits that they derive from this association, such as affiliation, inclusion, affection and the need for power.³⁰

Individuals who join drug-smuggling organisations do so because this association brings with it a sense of belonging, status, respect and pride. Walking away from these benefits can be challenging. For example, a 'narcotrafficker' may be respected for his material wealth, his ability to intimidate, threaten and carry out violence if necessary, or even an ability to perform good deeds. The decision to abandon this group may not be practical and he may decide instead to remain in the group despite the associated risks. This is evident in a study of drug smugglers in Canada, which found that members of drug trafficking organisations did not quit, despite having made enough money to retire from their illegal activities.³¹ Among the reasons they cited were greed, an expanded ego, identity, power, status, lifestyle, a sense of responsibility, addiction, complacency, lack of deterrence and pushing their luck until they got apprehended and prosecuted for their illegal activities.³² These findings are consistent with the underlying principles of group theories in which it argues that individuals join groups in order to enhance their social status, to gain respect and to gain a certain benefit from this association.

Groups provide the type of environment where members can compare their own beliefs, opinions and attitudes so that they can better understand their social reality.³³ Consistent with the latter underlying principles of group theories, drug traffickers will rely on their own informal networks to gather information including about new techniques to succeed in the drug trade, the price of illegal goods, group members who have been arrested, potential threats of drug shipment interception, informants and an overall gathering of intelligence, which helps them make better sense of their own reality. In the secretive environment in which they operate, these information-gathering

28. Cottam, M.L., Mastors, E., Preston, T. & Dietz, B.U. (2004) *Introduction to Political Psychology*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates inc, Mahwah, NJ.

29. Raven, B.H. & Rubin, J.Z. (1983) *Social Psychology 2nd Ed.*, Wiley, New York; and Harvey, J.H. & Weary, G. (1981) *Perspectives on Attributional Processes*, W. C. Brown, Dubuque, IA.

30. Mackie, D.M. & George, G.R. (1987) 'Individual and Group Goals', in *Review of Personality and Social Psychology: Group Processes*, ed. H. Clyde, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

31. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*.

32. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*, pp. 102-108.

33. Cottam, et al., *Introduction to Political Psychology*, p. 126.



techniques aid its members in making decisions on how best to avoid law enforcement detection and infiltration.

When it comes to groups, we first tend to be attracted to those who are most similar to us with regards to attitudes, beliefs, socioeconomic status and physical appearance; this is known as the interpersonal attraction perspective.³⁴ The characteristics of individual group members, such as sex, race, ethnicity and physical attractiveness can be very important to the functioning of the group as a whole, and as the degree of diversity increases, member tend to communicate less and display less commitment to the group.³⁵ This may explain why in Desroches' study, drug smugglers operated in small, tight-knit groups (three to nine members), composed mostly of relatives, friends with whom they had grown up, business associates, and members of the same racial or ethnic background. According to Desroches, "race and ethnicity factor into the structure and dynamics of drug crews since friendship and kinship networks within ethnic communities allow traffickers to assess a person's character...[additionally]... there is a tendency among groups to define members of one's own race and/or ethnicity as trustworthy and view others as outsiders".³⁶ The membership composition of these drug smuggling organisations assures a smooth working relationship and provides a continuous flow of information that allows the organisation to operate freely without law enforcement infiltration for long periods of time before they can be apprehended and prosecuted. The cohesion that the group is able to provide has kept drug cartels such as the Arellano Felix operating out of Tijuana and Amado Carrillo Fuentes in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico difficult to penetrate and disband, allowing such criminal organisations to grow large enough to pose a security threat to the communities and the societies in which they operate.

According to group theories, the larger the group size, the more conflict it will experience resulting in less cooperation and conformity to the group. This will naturally make the coordination of activities more difficult leading to social loafing and free riding of its members, which in turn can have harmful effects to the group's performance.³⁷ The latter factors may explain why drug cartels such as the Arellano Felix, with drug smuggling operations crossing international borders and a sphere of operations stretching over large areas in Mexico and the U.S., became too big to operate effectively, leading to its recent collapse.

34. Newcomb, T.M. (1956) 'The Prediction of Interpersonal Attraction', *American Psychologist*, vol. 11, pp. 575-585; also Festinger, L., Schachter, S. & Back, K. (1950) *Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, CA.

35. Widmeyer, W.N., Brawley, L.R. & Carron, A.V. (1990) 'The Effects of Group Size', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*; also Zenger, T.R. & Lawrence, B.S. (1989) 'Organisational Demography: The Differential Effects of Age and Tenure Distributions on Technical Communication', *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 32, pp. 353-376.

36. Desroches, *The Crime that Pays*, p. 46

37. Brewer, M.B. & Kramer, R.M. (1985) 'The Psychology of Intergroup Attitudes and Behavior', *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 36, pp. 219-243; also Olson, D.V.A. & Caddell, D.P. 'Generous Congregations, Generous Givers: Congregational Contexts that Stimulate Individual Giving', *Review of Religious Research*, December.

Conclusion

This study was a preliminary attempt to use Social Identity and Group theories in a content analysis of the 'narcocorridos'. This analysis was conducted in order to shed some light on the culture of the 'narco' and to explain the similarities and differences among gangs and other members of criminal organisations in society. **The conventional values found to be common among drug traffickers include the need for material wealth, power, belonging, respect, security and pride.** This work also puts into perspective the images and stereotypes that exist between in-groups versus out-groups and the role music plays in influencing the affects and emotions that propels these individuals into action. Finally, this study showed the research potential in the most unlikely of sources – music, which is broadcast on the public airwaves without much consideration for the effects it may cause on its listening audience and the possibilities of exploiting this source for further studies.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all of those who provided valuable feedback including Martha Cottam, Faith Lutze and other colleagues whose comments and encouragements made this work possible. Note: An original version of this paper was originally presented at the 28th Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology in Toronto Canada, 3-6 July 2005.