The policing of cuckooing in 'County Lines' drug dealing: An ethnographic study of an amplification spiral

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Responding to cases of 'cuckooing', where drug dealers take over other people's homes, has become a significant policing activity in the United Kingdom. Drawing on ethnographic data and the deviancy amplification spiral model, this article theorizes how police responses to cuckooing emerged, developed and became established. Five stages of the spiral are outlined: identifying cuckooing as a problem; demonstrating a response; spreading the problem; making it other people's problem too; the establishment of a policing priority. The article advances amplification theory by considering it from within the setting of the police and the contemporary drug supply context of County Lines. It concludes by stressing the importance of critically considering the dynamic relationship between the police and their drug market targets.

Key Words: cuckooing, drug markets, County Lines, drugs policing, amplification spiral

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, responding to 'cuckooing' has become a significant policing activity in the United Kingdom. The focus on this practice, where drug dealers take over vulnerable people's homes (see Spicer *et al.* 2020), can be partly explained by how it touches on a number of contemporary areas of policing prioritization (Charman 2017; Loader 2020). Because of its nature, it aligns with the desire to respond to vulnerability and prevent exploitation (Coliandris 2015; Moyle 2019). As a practice explicitly allied with 'County Lines', where drug dealers from urban hubs set up retail networks within provincial towns, it overlaps with concerns about recent drug markets evolutions, the apparent connection to serious violence and the wider association of crime and disorder with heroin and crack cocaine (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Mclean *et al.* 2019). By including other organizations in responding to cuckooing, it also ties into the promotion of multi-agency working, something particularly promoted over recent years due to reductions in police funding and desires for a so-called 'public health approach' (Van Dijk *et al.* 2019; Koch 2020). Following the alignment with these contemporary policing agendas, a desire to respond to cuckooing has become embedded into the practical activities of officers, who often now find this encompassing a significant part of their day-to-day work (Harding 2020; Spicer 2021a).

As with many other areas of prioritization, the recent elevation of cuckooing to become a significant area of focus can be considered the result of a number of organizational pressures, shaped by the wider social, cultural and political context in which the police operate (Chan 1997; Bowling *et al.* 2019). The dynamic processes that have taken place among officers during this time, and how these policing responses have interacted with the practice of cuckooing itself, are important to scrutinize. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article considers how responding to cuckooing emerged, developed and became established as a central policing activity. To theorize this process, it draws on the deviancy amplification spiral model. Deployed in a number of influential studies (e.g. Cohen 1972; Young 1971; Hall et al. 1978), this is a staple of the criminological tool box, allowing for the cyclical processes of interpretation, intensification and magnification to be considered analytically. This article advances the model by considering the spiralling process within the contemporary context of cuckooing and from within the vantage point of policing. The analysis also retains an awareness of the emotional and cultural 'energy' that runs throughout this process (Young 2009). Doing so allows for a fuller explanation of how and why responding to cuckooing has become established as a significant aspect of police work, and an appreciation of the dynamic relationship between this policing activity and its identified target.

The article begins with a discussion on the deviancy amplification spiral model, including how it has been applied and developed since its conception. After providing an overview of the fieldwork reported on in this article, the empirical analysis is presented. Drawing on a range of ethnographic data, five stages of the spiral surrounding cuckooing are outlined: (1) identifying cuckooing as a problem; (2) demonstrating a response; (3) spreading the problem; (4) making it other people's problem too and (5) the establishment of a policing priority. Shaped by the experiences of officers responding to cuckooing, the influence of wider national agendas and interactions with the practice of cuckooing itself, it is concluded that the spiral might be coming to a conclusion. While further developments may continue, it has become established as a policing priority, with ramifications for other organizations, communities and national policy.

DEVIANCY AMPLIFICATION SPIRALS

The contours of the deviancy amplification spiral model were first sketched out by Wilkins (1964). Influenced by developments in labelling theory (e.g. Becker 1963), his formulation stressed how social reaction to deviance can interact dynamically with the future actions and social position of the deviants themselves. As a form of 'dialectical progression' (Downes et al. 2016: 175), initial reactions to certain acts or groups considered a threat were viewed as setting off a spiralling chain of events. Yet, rather than these reactions solving the perceived problem, those identified for condemnation and subjected to tighter social control actually became 'hardened' in their deviance (Matsueda 1992). This paradoxically made—or at least gave the appearance of making—the original problem even more troublesome. The reaction to it then became even more urgent. As this process between the 'other and the otherer' (Young 2011) developed, a series of interrelated responses unfurled. Those defined as deviant found themselves increasingly socially isolated and identifying with 'precisely the threat that the self-appointed defenders of decency sought to warn against in the first place' (David *et al.* 2011). Fuelled by distortion and exaggeration from interest groups and the media, this self-fulfilment provided further impetus and justification for agents of social control to respond in highly visible and punitive ways. Such spirals continued to unwind until their circuit was broken or they tapered off. Some fizzled out quietly. Others had lasting effects (Martin 2019).

Just as Wilkins' contribution to the sociology of deviance was influenced by the burgeoning symbolic interactionist tradition, the theoretical foundations he laid proved fruitful grounds for

several landmark contributions to the criminological canon. His proposal of the model predated the formal establishment of the moral panic concept. But it was in the ground-breaking studies published on this topic by Cohen (1972), Young (1971) and Hall *et al.* (1978) where empirical flesh was famously added to the conceptual bones of the deviancy amplification spiral. There are important differences in how these studies deployed the model. Cohen (1972) was hesitant in presenting an overly linear analysis adhering to distinct stages in a fixed, amplified sequence. Instead, he focused on more loosely defined processes and how these develop and evolve in accordance with social reaction. Providing a 'Gramscian' analysis (Jefferson 2008), Hall *et al.* (1978) specifically stressed the role of the state in pursuing hegemonic domination. Their theoretical model was rendered closer to a 'signification spiral' (Critcher 2003: 15) with politicians and the media ideologically feeding off each other to form 'part of the circle' (Hall et al. 1978: 52) that constructed the mugging 'crisis'. It was arguably Young who provided the most linear of amplification models, even depicting it in diagram form (see Young 1971: 34). The police were placed at the centre of the process, with their reactions to cannabis users, interacting with societal 'fantasy'(s) and stereotypes, leading to an intensified problem justifying subsequently intensified responses. As this variance suggests, rather than considering the deviancy amplification spiral as a rigid model to be applied mechanistically, it is arguably better to consider it as a flexible analytical tool with the capacity to be adapted and developed.

An example of the spiral model's theoretical development is its modified deployment within left realism. Lea and Young (1984) identified the 'vicious cycle' that occurred when the police alienated deprived communities. The diminished trust, cooperation and communication between them was seen to lead to even more repressive modes of policing and worsening relationships. Similar examples have applied this to youth offending (e.g. Keane *et al.* 1989; Wiley and Esbensen 2016). There have also been attempts to identify reverse models, such as Button and Tunley's (2015) notion of 'deviancy attenuation', which sought to explain why certain financial crimes are regularly responded to with minimal criminal justice resources and condemnation. But it is perhaps cultural criminology that has done the most to promote a more flexible conceptualization of amplification spirals. Placing the speed, reflexivity and fluidity of late modernity at the heart of their analysis, cultural criminologists have developed what might be considered a wider body of amplification theory (Ferrell and Hayward 2011). Building on the notion of mediatized 'loops' (Manning 1998), contemporary crime spirals are considered as shaping the meanings that infuse situated action, public perception and social reaction (Fraser and Atkinson 2014). They unwind quickly and reconstruct perceptions, 'all the while echoing, at other times undermining, meanings and experiences already constructed' (Ferrell *et al.* 2015: 158). These spirals take place around specific cases or incidents, but they can also be identified within some of the broadest criminal justice trends. How the 'drug war' has rapaciously fed off itself over decades could be considered a classic example (Reinarman and Levine 2004).

In whatever form amplification theory is deployed and the spiralling process conceptualized, it is important to recognize that the consequences of these dynamic processes are 'real' (Matthews 2014). This is appropriate even in cyberspace where 'algorithmic deviancy amplification' has been identified (Wood 2017). Despite its roots, the model's development demonstrates that it does not have to be wedded to moral panic analysis. These might be 'easy and a lot of fun' (Cohen 2002: xxxv), but they provide diminished returns when reduced to thin commentaries on how a social problem is severely overestimated and the reaction to it exaggerated (Garland 2008). There have been valuable drug policy analyses adopting Bacchi's (2009) post-structuralist 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach (e.g. Brown and Wincup 2020), however adopting a critical realist position that attempts to provide adequate accounts of phenomena understood as existing independently outside of discourses and methods has been suggested as providing greater explanatory power (Stevens 2020). While the amplification

spiral model has 'reaction' and 'interaction' at its core, from this theoretical position, it represents a valuable analytic tool that can be deployed while avoiding some of the critiques levelled at 'social reaction theory' (Hall and Winlow 2015: 38) or 'liberal' criminology (Matthews 2014).

This article continues the development of amplification theory by considering the spiralling process surrounding the drug market practice of cuckooing and how it has recently played out within the context of policing. Building on arguments regarding the 'symbolic' policing of County Lines (see Coomber *et al.* 2019; Spicer 2021), it provides original analysis by applying the amplification spiral model to this area and identifying five key stages of how both the practice of cuckooing itself and police perceptions of it have become amplified. There are two key reasons why this article can also be considered a thematic development of Young's (1971) work published half a century ago. First, both studies specifically focus on a social problem surrounding illegal drugs. Young was interested in cannabis use and the setting of the stage for the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. This article focuses on heroin and crack cocaine market activity, considering how it is shaped by recent trends within drug policy (Brown and Wincup 2020) and policing of addressing 'vulnerability' (Asquith *et al.* 2017). Second, both studies specifically consider the role of the police in amplifying deviance and how they shape the spiralling process. Young considered this from the perspective of cannabis users who were subjected to policing. This article focuses on police officers subjecting others to social control. By drawing inspiration from its original applications, the analysis, therefore, seeks to demonstrate how amplification theory can provide critical insight into recent criminal justice developments.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data presented in this article were collected during two phases of doctoral research. The aim of the project was to explore County Lines drug supply and how it was being responded to in provincial areas experiencing the presence of dealers from urban hubs (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Harding 2020). It soon became clear that cuckooing was central to this. The first phase of data collection, undertaken during the summer of 2017, comprised ten in-depth interviews with police officers specifically tasked with responding to County Lines in one force area. Four of these were detectives of various seniority. The remaining six were uniformed officers also ranging in rank. Relatively small scale and exploratory in scope, the questions driving this data collection concerned what County Lines was and how it was understood by the police. A relatively inductive approach was used to analyse the transcripts, drawing on tenets proposed by Charmaz (2014).

This initial analysis set the foundations for the main phase of ethnographic data collection. Following approval by the University of the West of England's ethics committee, 14 months of fieldwork was undertaken between September 2017 and November 2018 with a different anonymized police force. Significant levels of access were obtained, allowing me to venture 'backstage' (Goffman 1959) and observe responses to County Lines out on the streets and behind police station doors. Spending time across four medium- and large-sized towns experiencing the highest levels of County Lines activity and cases of cuckooing in the force area, I accompanied uniformed and plain clothed officers as they conducted relevant work, adopting the role of 'observer as participant' (Gold 1958). Access was principally provided by two senior officers who acted as gatekeepers. Researching what was an increasingly 'newsy' topic (Wacquant 2008) undoubtedly helped with access and legitimized my presence in the field. I attended various internal briefings and meetings, went out on patrols, observed 'days of action', witnessed warrants being executed and accompanied officers conducting welfare checks on local residents. Detailed field notes were written up at the end of each day. Twelve key police officers and staff members were formally interviewed, many on multiple occasions. At several times, I was based in two intelligence units, creating anonymized and sanitized notes based on the content of the reports they

received. A final part of the fieldwork involved attending a multi-agency group consisting of local organizations, including community safety officers, housing providers and drug service workers. From this, I conducted formal interviews with 15 representatives from across these partnership organizations. Collecting this range of data allowed for a fuller understanding of local drug market dynamics and the policing activities undertaken in response (Coomber 2004).

In addition to the small body of ethnographic work on drugs policing (e.g. Collison 1995; Bacon 2016), the study drew methodological inspiration from those categorized as being within the 'controversy' and 'conflict' stages of police research (Reiner 2010). Such studies provide the type of critical analysis that can be overlooked when considering what contributes to an 'evidence base' either in relation to drug policy (Stevens 2020) or policing (Bullock *et al.* 2019). It is also here where many of the pioneering amplification spiral studies could be considered to sit. The data from both phases of the project were analysed with the amplification spiral serving as a sensitizing and organizing concept (Charmaz 2014). Inevitably this analysis was partly chronological. But the five identified phases of the cuckooing spiral were also constructed by a process of adaptive coding that 'flip flopped' between the developing analysis and existing concepts (Layder 1998). These stages structure the remainder of the article.

FINDINGS

Identifying cuckooing as a problem

The beginnings of the spiral align with the emergence of 'County Lines' onto policing agendas (Coliandris 2015). Considered a core component of this high profile drug market development, it is here when the practice of cuckooing became formally defined, awareness of it grew and the term trickled into the police vocabulary. Since 2015, the National Crime Agency (NCA) has published annual briefings on County Lines. Reporting on trends, developments and various data, these have been influential in setting the national agenda. Throughout my fieldwork, they also appeared to be the chief source for developing local understandings, demonstrated by how regularly they were stapled onto police station notice boards, scattered across desks and how frequently officers referred to their content. Reflecting on the first two of these briefings (NCA 2015; 2016) it is notable how prominently they place the threat to local populations by those involved in this drug supply practice. Recently, the term 'County Lines' has become almost synonymous with the exploitation of young people as drug runners (Robinson *et al.* 2019; Windle *et al.* 2020). However, in these first official publications, the threat of violence and cuckooing from 'out-of-town' dealers towards local adults were given equal weighting in the explanations of why the County Lines phenomenon needed to be responded to. Taking their lead from these reports, this framing translated into the specific actions and orientations of officers on the ground. As a core component of the wider threat posed by County Lines, cuckooing became identified as a significant local problem requiring a response.

The emerging agenda surrounding County Lines presented two particular challenges for police officers in affected areas. Setting the foundations for the spiral, both of these promoted the specific focus on cuckooing and influenced the nature of their responses to it. The first challenge was the threat of 'gangs' being active in their towns (Andell 2019). With County Lines involving 'out-of-town' dealers travelling into areas from major cities (Coomber and Moyle 2018), fear around the crime and violence these unfamiliar intruders could bring were high. One officer stated:

> This is [force area]. It's pretty, quiet, somewhere people want to come and visit. Yeah, we have our druggies and stuff, but we shouldn't have these sort of dealers running about. [Police Constable]

As argued elsewhere (Spicer 2021b), County Lines dealers represented 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966: 33). Their presence 'polluted' the local drug markets and towns. This provoked anxiety among officers, a desire for 'action' to be taken against them and a sense of 'mission' to find them (Loftus 2009; Bacon 2016). Yet, due to the clandestine nature of illicit markets, simply going out and finding them was not a necessarily straightforward task. Following those who officers believed to be users of heroin and crack cocaine was one strategy. As one officer described while cruising around in a van:

> You follow the shit and eventually they end up taking you to the people you're looking for! [Fieldnotes]

But the most popular and time-efficient strategy was visiting the homes of known local users of heroin and crack. These were considered the best places to find these dealers. Conducting un-announced welfare checks on their homes, therefore, served a dual purpose. It allowed officers to respond to potential cases of cuckooing, while, importantly for them, also offering potential opportunities to encounter those involved in County Lines drug supply and achieve the types of 'results' they were after.

The second key challenge posed by the emergence of County Lines and its agenda at this time was the need to safeguard 'vulnerable' populations. The emphasis on responding to who officers regularly referred to as 'the vulnerable' and reducing exploitation was coming to the fore more widely in policing (Colinadris 2015). It was notably from 2015 that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary began formally assessing forces on their effectiveness at protecting vulnerable people (HMIC 2015). With cuckooing framed as an exploitative process, those affected by the practice fitted this 'vulnerable' categorization. They were considered to have little agency and represented suitable populations to apply this policing agenda to. One detective sought to contrast her team's 'new' approach to their old:

> I suppose classic policing is, you know, somebody's dealing drugs, we deal with them, that's it - thanks very much and we move on to the next. That was our old, you know, policing style. But then County Lines, the way they work, they will look to exploit people who have got [drug] habits and so although they're committing crime they're still potentially vulnerable. So, it's identifying what we can put in place in order to assist them, to try and sort of bubble wrap them, if that makes sense. [Detective]

The desire to apply this vulnerability agenda towards cuckooing victims appeared to be re-inforced by the lack of other populations to apply it to. Despite a concurrent national emphasis being placed on young people as the other vulnerable population being exploited as part of County Lines (McLean *et al.* 2019; Spicer 2019), this was something many officers did not consider that they were being particularly exposed to. One detective claimed:

> There's a lot of this talk about them exploiting kids coming out. I don't know, I think they're overplaying it a bit. We're just not seeing it down here. [Senior Detective]

Faced with this apparent lack of exposure to suitably vulnerable and exploited young people, this led to an even more intense focus on local populations, who firmly represented the primary targets of the police's safeguarding activities.

In short, in these early stages, cuckooing became a more formal and identifiable term, recognized by police officers and placed onto both national and local agendas principally through its association with County Lines. Because of how it was framed, it also aligned neatly with con-

temporary policing priorities around vulnerability (Coliandris 2015). While inevitably taking place before (Spicer *et al.* 2020), the practice became 'novel' because of how its construction interplayed with the partial insight the police had into the true nature of the practice. Officers were encouraged not to necessarily view a local flat they came across that was occupied by someone who used heroin and someone selling it as a degenerate 'crackhouse' in the way they might have previously (Briggs 2010). Instead, the vulnerabilities of the local resident and the exploitation they might be experiencing were stressed as something for officers to be acutely aware of and respond to accordingly.

Demonstrating a response

Having identified cuckooing as a local problem, various responses quickly followed. While undertaking these was somewhat inevitable, importantly they served useful functions for the police. The visibility of these activities served dual aims. First, officers were able to represent their responses to cuckooing as evidence that they were responding to County Lines locally, an issue that was rapidly becoming a national priority and emphasized by senior police officers and political figures (NCA 2017; HM Government 2018). Second, because of the nature of cuckooing and who was involved, they were able to publicize these activities, communicate to local communities and send 'control signals' (Innes, 2014) about familiar public concerns regarding the visibility of drugs, those who use them and the activities attributed to them in their areas (Collison 1995; Coomber et al. 2019). On both levels, rather than just being an enforcement necessity, demonstrating responses to cuckooing served multiple purposes for local officers.

How and why these policing activities took the form they did was influenced by an interplay between the local context and national agendas. When discussing his identified amplification spiral, Cohen (1971) noted a social control reaction of 'diffusion', where awareness of a problem spread from local areas to the national stage. This led to an escalation of existing social control measures and the innovation of new ones. In the case of cuckooing, the direction of this diffusion appeared reversed. The establishment of cuckooing as a key component of the County Lines phenomenon nationally was dispersed to local areas, instigating the awareness, impetus to respond among officers and wider social reaction. Despite this reversal of diffusion, what remained consistent were existing measures being escalated and new ones being innovated. The extensive use of welfare checks on potential victims of cuckooing became an increasingly popular activity. Undertaking these fitted with responding to vulnerability, while also allowing officers to quantify how many people they had visited and 'safeguarded'. These numbers were important as they were regularly promoted in various forums and internal reports. Alongside this, the introduction of new policing practices, such as providing people with 'cuckooing letters', also emerged. Their content included guidance and information of support services for those deemed at risk. Perhaps most importantly for the officers, they also stressed that the police were actively watching their home. Because of this, those in receipt of the letters were encouraged to show them to 'out-of-town' dealers if they tried to enter. Walking out of a flat where the occupant had recounted how showing a letter had successfully deterred County Lines dealers from wanting to use her home, an officer enthusiastically stated:

> That right there is exactly the sort of thing we want! It's about target hardening, stopping the dealers from getting a foothold in our area. [Fieldnotes]

Responding to cuckooing through the intensification of familiar activities and the introduction of new ones provided officers with evidence to show how they were responding to the threat posed by County Lines locally. It communicated their response to this issue of national import-

ance. Relatedly, it demonstrated how they were attempting to make their local area, as one officer put it, 'a hostile place' for dealers to enter.

In addition to aligning with the national agenda, demonstrating their responses to cuckooing allowed officers to communicate with local stakeholders and communities. As has been widely discussed, drugs and those who use them are regularly feared, blamed for a wide range of social problems and the source of societal anxiety (Fitzgerald and Threadgold 2004; Alexandrescu 2018). By representing their responses to cuckooing as actively addressing local concerns about drugs within their area, officers were, therefore, able to construct them as 'control signals' (Innes 2014). This was aided through media engagement. Seemingly attracted to stories about cuckooing because of how well they fitted with many news values, including spatial proximity and its novelty as a 'new' form of crime (Jewkes 2015), local news outlets frequently reported on them. Because of the journalistic reliance on the police for these stories (see Mawby 2010), these articles were also typically told in ways that conformed to officer perspectives. This created 'loops' (Manning 1998) that reinforced both the apparent threat of this specific practice and how the responses were evidence of the police taking action against drugs in the local area.

In addition to local media coverage, responding to cuckooing gave some officers more immediate feedback from local people and communities. Conducting so-called 'days of action' in certain towns and executing warrants on homes suspected of harbouring drugs and 'out-of-town' dealers led to various positive experiences. After enacting a closure order on a flat that had both recently been cuckooed and had a long history of antisocial behaviour, one officer described the reaction his team had experienced:

> We were getting a lot of support when we were going along and putting signs on the door and putting leaflets out to neighbours. The neighbours were coming out onto the street and almost applauding all of us doing the work because they were so pleased and relieved that something had been done. [Police Sergeant]

Such experiences appeared to reinforce the value of responding to cuckooing and how it could allow them to achieve wider aims, such as public confidence. Some officers also had positive experiences with specific cases. A few of these turned into 'classic' examples of effective responses to cuckooing, becoming culturally engrained as policing 'victory stories' (Shearing and Ericson 1991). An officer involved in one such case recounted it:

> She was a drug user and she was always indebted to these guys to the point where she was having to prostitute. And she'd pay them and they'd say 'oh no you owe us more money'. So we got her away on the National Referral Mechanism. Because she was having to sell her body to these people and always indebted to them she was almost being forced to do that. She was just in that cycle which she couldn't get out. So it was basically a referral, she was accepted on that, then it's the Salvation Army that help out with that. They came and picked her up and took her to [northern city] where she's living. So completely away from it all. So again it's identifying those vulnerable people and trying to help them. [Police Constable]

Cases such as these were widely shared. They were held as evidence of how successful officers could be in responding to cuckooing locally, the importance of their work in this area and how this could be done within the vulnerability agenda.

Throughout this period, responses to cuckooing continued to be undertaken and publicized. The dual function provided by the communicative properties of these actions nationally and locally also began to merge (Coomber *et al.* 2019). With the County Lines phenomenon becoming increasingly well known because of the acute attention it was receiving, this policing activity

also became a demonstration to certain local audiences about how the officers were responding to this issue of national importance. The officers were not only able to frame the responses to cuckooing to communities as dealing with local drug problems but were also increasingly able to justify it to them based on the need to respond to County Lines.

Spreading the problem

There were a number of symbolic and material outcomes from the initial police responses to cuckooing. Arguably, the most notable was how the intense focus on this drug market practice and the 'success' officers had led to an apparent spread of the problem. In line with the long history of drugs policing outcomes (see Werb *et al.* 2011), the efforts of the officers did not eradicate cuckooing. Despite their 'target hardening' aims, their activities also did not appear to reduce the presence of County Lines dealers operating within their towns. Instead, in a familiar drug market response to enforcement pressure, the practice was displaced (Windle and Farrell 2012), with intelligence suggesting dealers were moving onto other people and other neighbourhoods. Both in terms of quantity and quality, the manifestation of cuckooing appeared to change. This was a material outcome of police work. But, perhaps most importantly, these changes continued to develop the construction of the problem because of how they were perceived by officers. This dynamic was central to accelerating the amplification spiral.

The apparent increases in the amount of cuckooing taking place principally appeared to be a result of the police's intensified focus. This corresponds with what has often been found when the police train their sights on a particular 'problem' (e.g. Hall *et al.* 1978) or in drugs policing activities more generally (Bear 2016). In short, the more the officers looked for cuckooing, the more they found. Motivated by their personal experiences with individual cases and the intensifying national spotlight, by searching harder and placing an emphasis on this as a core part of their work, they increasingly uncovered more dealers occupying local addresses. By taking various forms of action that made it more difficult for cuckooing to occur in these cases, this seemingly led to dealers going elsewhere and cuckooing others instead. One officer described her experiences of chasing off cuckooing dealers only for them to pop up elsewhere shortly after as a game of 'whack-a-mole'. Similar perceptions were reinforced by intelligence reports consistently suggesting an increasing spread. Not only, therefore, did officers find more cases of cuckooing the more they searched for them, but the more cases they found, the further the practice spread and the more cases were created for them to find in the future. Sometimes this spread could be to different areas in a town; other times it involved dealers moving into neighbouring homes. One officer recounted:

> We helped a gentleman who was an alcoholic. He lived next door to somebody else who had dealers in with them, they then started frequenting his address. [Police Constable]

The spiral was intensified by the accompanying impression that the presence of County Lines dealers was growing in their towns. The increased uncovering of cuckooing cases nearly always involved dealers who fitted this supplier category. The greater focus on those involved in this type of dealing also led to further awareness of their use of cuckooing. This reinforced anxieties about the influx of 'gangs', the threat to vulnerable locals and the need to respond for reasons of both local and national importance. One officer lamented:

> I think a lot of them think that they can come down here and do what they want and run around and not have the same risk that they do from the Met or wherever. [Police Sergeant]

As important as the effect of this policing activity was on the quantity of cuckooing, it also appeared to influence its quality. As others have reported (Coomber 2015), it is not uncommon

for some heroin and crack users to have had dealers stay in their homes periodically for many years. An unintended consequence of taking action against these cases—which were typically those that officers came across first—was that it led to dealers moving on to more 'unusual suspects' instead. Increasingly, those closer to 'ideal victims' (Christie 1986) were found to be affected. The awareness of this apparent trajectory was neatly illustrated when officers based in different towns traded stories of the most 'shocking' cases they had recently experienced, with a case of a young man with learning difficulties and his grandmother receiving the loudest outcries of 'moral indignation' (Young 2009). Other cases that officers became exposed to had a similar effect. One involved a young woman who lived in a semi-detached house. This was rare compared to the flats or bedsits that officers usually visited, particularly as the occupant apparently had a mortgage. On the drive over to conduct a welfare check, one officer speculated that:

> They've gone in and got her addicted, that's what I reckon. Why else would she be letting them in there? [Fieldnotes]

Influenced by several 'pusher myths' (Coomber 2006), it was unlikely that this was actually an accurate explanation. But in addition to how such cases signalled how more 'classically' vulnerable people were increasingly being cuckooed, they were, perhaps more importantly, considered to demonstrate that 'out-of-town' dealers posed an increasing threat and the problem was getting worse.

This spiral around the quality of cuckooing accelerated further with more exploitative practices becoming apparently increasingly common. In place of disrupted 'reciprocal rental' scenarios between locals and dealers (Coomber and Moyle 2018), more examples of 'parasitic nest invasion' (Spicer *et al.* 2020) emerged. This partly appeared to result from more 'ideal' victims being targeted. But it also appeared to be due to some dealers finding it more difficult to find places to stay and resorting to threats or deception to enable access. One middle-aged man who was still distressed when officers visited him reported how dealers had tricked their way into his home and barricaded him in his bedroom for over a day. Such apparent occurrences of increasing and increasingly exploitative cases further led to the officers believing that the cuckooing problem in their area was getting worse. Responding to it was viewed as even more important and urgent. Following the identification and response to the problem, the amplification spiral therefore unfurled, with the quantity and quality of the practice seemingly being influenced by the police tactics while simultaneously instigating more intense responses.

Making it other people's problem too

The amplification spiral around cuckooing continued with the police involving others in their responses. In his amplification analysis, Young (1971) identified that the police were key mediators between communities and their understanding of deviant groups. In the response to cuckooing, a similar role was observable, with officers being influential in how other local organizations understood the practice. Observing how the police played the role of mediator, Young argued that as officers typically had an isolated position in communities, they were susceptible to stereotypes and fantasies about outsiders. Regarding cuckooing responses, officers similarly had an inevitable lack of insight into the true operations of the local drug market because of its clandestine nature and their oppositional relationship with those operating within it. When discussing the practice of cuckooing with others, they regularly relied on stereotypes and partial constructions of cases, sometimes almost to the point of them reaching the state of 'fantasy'. This was particularly apparent at local community events, such as safeguarding conferences where typically senior officers, who were even further removed from the realities of cases at the street level, attempted to explain what cuckooing was to those in attendance and raise local awareness.

As another key part of their mediator role, Young (1971) argued that police officers negotiated realities through the course of their duties to fit with the stereotypes they held in their minds. Again a comparable process was observable in the response to cuckooing, especially in the multi-agency work officers undertook. While an emphasis was placed on trying, as one officer stressed at the first meeting, to 'make everyone equal partners', it was clear that the police were ultimately the majority shareholders. The meetings were held in police stations and always chaired by police officers. This dominance could be partly explained by longstanding dynamics in police partnership work (Sampson et al. 1988; Crawford and Jones 1995). The social position of the police, the powers at their disposal and expectations regarding their problem-solving capacities appeared to drive the impression that they were the default organization to lead on the issue. As one partner suggested:

> There's something behind that enforcement badge that says 'we're the police, we can lead on things', I suppose. [Trading Standards Intelligence Officer]

This dominance also appeared to be driven by officers wanting to give the impression that they knew what was going on in the local drug market and were on top of the high profile issue of County Lines. With both of these dynamics combined, the police sat in the driving seat of the partnership work in response to cuckooing and decided on the direction of travel. How the practice was understood by others was, therefore, dominated by their version of reality.

A key implication of this was its influence on how cuckooing continued to be responded to. Constructed in a police-centric manner, responses to cuckooing involving other agencies were dominated by how officers viewed the problem and the types of activities they wanted to pursue. Often this would involve officers using other organizations to enable them to pursue existing tactics in more rigorous ways. On one 'day of action', officers organized to meet a housing association staff member early in the morning so that she could provide access to a block of flats where several known users of heroin resided. This provided easy entry but also allowed officers to enter inconspicuously and stand outside the flat doors to hear if anyone was outside. By carrying out what one described as 'surprise welfare checks', officers attempted to catch occupants unaware and make it difficult for any cuckooing dealers to remain undetected. In this sense, engaging with other organizations in response to cuckooing was principally used by officers as a way of leveraging their ability to enhance their existing enforcement practices rather than engaging in genuine collaboration. Notably, those who did not conform or 'play nicely' (O'Neill 2014) with the police, such as the owners of a Bed and Breakfast who requested notice the next time a team of five officers started knocking on each room and asking occupants if they could come inside, were denounced as fuelling the problem, making officer's lives more difficult and further evidence of why they needed to take the lead and continue to vigorously pursue cases of cuckooing themselves.

A final way that the involvement of other organizations contributed to the cuckooing spiral was through intelligence generation. A central pillar of the multi-agency response set up by the police was the establishment of a 'disruption panel', consisting of a range of local organizations focused on the presence of County Lines in their area. Similar to motivations identified in earlier stages, its establishment provided officers with dual benefits. Nationally, forming these was being encouraged by the Home Office. Locally, after briefing these organizations about cuckooing, stressing the importance of awareness and their involvement in responding to it, officers were obliged to provide a way for them to do this. Conforming to the notion of the police as 'information brokers' (Ericson and Haggerty 1997), other organizations were compelled to become what several officers described as 'another pair of eyes and ears'. While the group's remit was on County Lines broadly, because of who these organizations were and what they were exposed to, the intelligence they shared focused predominantly on cuckooing.

Similar to the aforementioned spreading dynamic, receiving this intelligence added to the perception among officers that it was occurring more. It appeared likely that there was some genuine proliferation of the practice because of this increased focus. But primarily this appeared driven by these organizations being more aware of the practice and searching for it themselves. Demonstrating how the intensified problem of cuckooing had been constructed, one reported the increase in drug-related cases they had witnessed in their caseload:

> Just as an interesting fact, we've collated our reports of our ASB [Anti-Social Behaviour] cases, and last year there 6% of our cases were drug related cases, and then for this year over the same period, 22% of our cases were drug related cases. So you can see that there's been quite an increase. [Housing Association Manager]

The greater awareness of cuckooing among these local organizations, alongside being actively encouraged to report cases to the police, also fed into the perceived quality of cuckooing occurring. Some further 'shocking' cuckooing stories emerged, perhaps heightened from the perspective of the police officers as they were told about them rather than experiencing them first hand (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020). Being unaware of these cases and those affected further led to the perception that the practice was becoming more common and more exploitative. The nature of the intelligence sharing process served to further intensify this. Reports from other organizations often took longer to filter through compared to those received internally from officers. This combined to further the impression that the activity was intensifying, heightened when officers attempted to respond to some of this intelligence and found themselves chasing the tails of dealers who had already moved on.

The establishment of a policing priority

It is probably unwise to assert with certainty that the amplification spiral surrounding cuckooing has reached its final coils. But it would seem reasonable to conclude that responding to it has become firmly established as a core policing priority. As other amplification analysts have suggested, while spirals may wash away without leaving much of a societal footprint, others can have longer-lasting repercussions (Cohen 2002). Based on its state at the end of the fieldwork period and how it has seemingly developed since, the cuckooing spiral would appear to be leaning towards the latter. This is visible through how it is perceived by police officers, its effect on wider communities and its influence on national policy.

By the end of the fieldwork, there were signs that cuckooing had transitioned from the 'hot thing' for police officers to look out for to being engrained in their minds as a familiar occurrence requiring routine responses. Professional activities associated with cuckooing became 'culturally axiomatic' (Sackmann 1991), no longer novel or inherently worthy of external communication. As with previous drug market developments, such as the 'arrival' of crack cocaine in the United Kingdom, the responses to cuckooing became part of the core functions of drugs policing, shaped by the wider context that they operated in (Dorn *et al.* 1992; Collison 1995; Bacon 2016). At a national level, the focus on cuckooing continues to be represented and justified as a way to disrupt the activities of County Lines dealers (see NCA 2019). It also continues to be tied to the vulnerability agenda. As discussed elsewhere (Spicer 2021a), regarding the latter, while there can be some genuine benefits to this, it can serve as something of a double-edged sword. Increased interaction between officers and people who use drugs within the existing drug policy context, even with the best of intentions, risks increased criminalization and exclusion. Drugs policing may change and adapt over time, but it is rooted in a model that regularly produces outcomes antithetical to reducing drug market harms (Coomber *et al.* 2019).

The final stages of the fieldwork also demonstrated the spiral's lasting effect on local communities. With cuckooing established as an area of focus, it became entwined with, and often blamed for, other local problems. As awareness of it grew, the presence of cuckooing increasingly became connected to other traditional community concerns, such as antisocial behaviour or the presence of drugs (Foster 2000). Because of this heightened 'sensitisation' (Cohen 2002), where these 'traditional' problems were identified, suspicions that there would also be cuckooing often followed. This also worked in the opposite direction, with a case of cuckooing in one housing estate used to explain away all of the local problems and complaints that had been received. One consequence of this was that, having played an active role in the spiral themselves, other organizations found themselves submerged in responding to it. As one staff member of a housing provider described, they were faced with the prospect that this was now a core part of their work:

> This is how I feel, it's a personal opinion, is that you feel like they're never going to go away now. So, we've got to now sort of accept it and deal with it. You know it's become part of our organisational practice, how to deal with Organised Crime Gangs, which two or three years ago we'd never even thought of. So, it's quite a new thing. So, you just feel like you're just going to keep moving them. I mean, there's so many properties and you keep just going round and round and round (…) But you do, you just feel like it's part of your routine, you're just waiting for the next one really. [Neighbourhood Manager for Housing Provider]

Finally, through the dialectic of diffusion between local responses and national agendas, the concluding stages of the cuckooing spiral are also observable in its influence on recent national policy changes. When discussing how a process of amplification informed the establishment of the current UK drug policy framework, Young (1971: 170), argued that 'A situation defined as real in a society will be real in its consequences'. While slightly more modest in impact, the spiralling process surrounding cuckooing also appears to be making 'real' changes. The increased consideration of using Modern Slavery legislation within this drug market context is one example (Stone 2018). The prominence of cuckooing in proposed changes to drug offence sentencing (Sentencing Council 2020) also arguably demonstrates how the amplification surrounding cuckooing has seeped into the wider functioning of the criminal justice system. Cohen (2002: 1) suggested that amplification spirals 'might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy'. From the national to the local context, around and back again, the cuckooing spiral appears on course to achieve that.

CONCLUSION

The established canon of criminological theory has come under heavy critique from some recently (Hall and Winlow 2015). While many arguments surrounding the importance of creating new theoretical frameworks for understanding crimes and social harms are compelling, the value of the amplification spiral model in developing an understanding of the relationship between a significant contemporary drug market development and area of policing focus has arguably demonstrated the continued worth of this more familiar idea. By treating its object of study as 'real' (Matthews 2014; Stevens 2020), the model allows for the development of a narratively driven ethnographic analysis that has become relatively rare in criminology. Recognising the importance of how drug markets and drugs policing influence each other (see Collison 1995; Bacon 2016), it also allows for critical attention to be placed on the dynamic relationship between criminal action and criminal justice reaction.

Writing almost 30 years ago, Dorn *et al.* (1992) argued that drugs policing in the United Kingdom consistently seeks to 'mirror' how officers believe the drug market to be structured. The cuckooing spiral presented in this article demonstrates how this continues to play out. Central was the interaction between the local and national context. Officers took their cue from the national agendas surrounding County Lines and vulnerability. The nature of this local threat being created by intruding 'impure' outsiders compounded this, accelerating anxieties and the drive to respond to it. Based on the framing of this identified problem, officers were compelled to pursue drugs policing activities that reflected what they believed to be occurring in their local markets (Bacon 2016). In classic spiralling fashion, the outcomes of these activities justified their undertaking and, because of both real and perceived changes, further stressed their importance. Recruiting other organizations into helping with the policing responses they sought to pursue kept the spiral going further around. The focus was intensified, adding to the apparent quantity and exploitative nature of the practice they were responding to.

Given the significant legacy of other amplification research, there are theoretical lessons that can be drawn from the past. Just as Young (1971) identified, with its tendency for unintended consequences, drugs policing appears to remain particularly vulnerable to amplifying problems. The hidden nature of drug markets, the cultural tensions between those who enforce and engage with illegal markets and the wider terrain of contemporary drug policy compound this (Collison 1995; Manning 2004; Bear 2016). From this article's analysis, it is not possible to say exactly how much material change to the quantity and quality of cuckooing was driven by police responses and how much was embedded in the perceptions of officers. But, ultimately, attempting to do so is missing the point. It is likely practically impossible to establish any accurate measure of the 'real' level of the cuckooing problem. It is also highly unlikely that police officers are capable of preventing it from occurring. Rather than relying on policing activities that might actually make the situation worse, to attenuate the real harms that people experience from exposure to the drug market, looking deeper at the structures that make them 'vulnerable' should be at the forefront of considering what truly effective responses to cuckooing might be.

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