Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese Women's Pathways into Australia's Illicit Drug Trade

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary knowledge on drug traffickers, particularly in terms of their characteristics and motivations, continue to be informed by myths and misconceptions rather than empirical evidence. This thesis explores questions concerning why and how individuals become involved in drug trafficking in the first place. The answers to these questions have serious implications as to how the drug problem is understood and subsequently addressed by political, law enforcement and academic circles. Taking my cue from past ethnographic and anthropological studies that have demonstrated the significance of privileging the voices of drug traffickers, I conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Vietnamese women incarcerated for drug crimes in Victoria, Australia.

The 35 women in this study represented a diverse cross-section of Vietnamese migrants in Australia: from the early arrivals of refugees, family reunion and sponsored marriage migrants to the more recent wave of international students and Vietnamese nationals arriving on tourist and skilled migration visas. The women were aged between 20 and 59 years, and most were unemployed at the time of incarceration. The majority of interviews were conducted in Vietnamese as most women had low levels of English proficiency. Of the 35 women interviewed, 20 were incarcerated for heroin trafficking and 15 for cannabis cultivation. For most women, this incarceration was a result of their first arrest.

Overall, this thesis demonstrated that drug trafficking is a complex social phenomenon and the circumstances that shaped the women's pathways into the illicit drug trade were embedded within a complex web of historical, cultural, social and economic structures. Most notably, it was found that more than half of the women in this study started drug trafficking to resolve gambling debts incurred through Melbourne's casino. Specifically, problem gambling in Melbourne's casino provided both the main motivation and the necessary networks for their involvement in drug-related crime. However, not everyone in this study was motivated by, or connected to the drug trade through gambling. Other motives identified in this study included economic gain, non-gambling debt resolution, romantic love and drug dependency.

In addition to highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics that underpinned the women's motives, this thesis also demonstrated that pathways into drug trafficking were primarily made possible through the women's personal and social networks. Additionally, opportunities for involvement in drug distribution were, above all else, determined by the women's ethnic Vietnamese background. However, the social and cultural embeddedness observed in this study was a far-cry from the tightly-knit kinship and communal ties routinely reported in previous studies on ethnic drug networks. Rather, most women's kinship ties were thin and precarious. Contrary to prevailing portrayals of women's involvement in the drug trade, no one in this study characterised their participation in drug trafficking as being controlled or exploited by their menfolk.

I argue that it is only through a qualitative paradigm – one that gives precedence to minority perspectives – that new insights and alternative understandings of drug traffickers are possible. Most importantly, the stories presented by the women in this study challenge traditional stereotypes that portray them as anything but 'normal'. In fact, this thesis revealed that rather than being 'extra-ordinary', these women were 'ordinary individuals', who were driven into the illicit drug trade to resolve, or change the difficult circumstances in their own lives.

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Finally, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation to all the women who participated in my study. It is my sincere hope that this thesis faithfully represents their experiences.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature: …………………………………

Date: …………………………………

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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

> Police concern that Asian crime gangs are using schoolchildren to traffic heroin in Melbourne's western suburbs must alarm all parents. The tragic consequence has been a rise in deaths from heroin overdoses from two last year to 11 this year. The police say the explosion in heroin-pushing in the west is related to a police crackdown in Sydney's Cabramatta where members of established Vietnamese gangs have been forced to Melbourne.
> (*Herald Sun*, editorial, 29/11/1995)

> Police have identified more than 100 Melbourne-based drug couriers smuggling heroin from Vietnam for seven major crime syndicates… Detectives say heroin couriers are arriving at Melbourne Airport at least weekly and some have made several trips… The syndicates are mainly using the one drug source in Ho Chi Minh City and are importing heroin that is at least 80 per cent pure. Each pellet is wrapped identically and weighs 70-80 grams. Inspector Fryer said a courier could be paid up to $24 000 from one run but the syndicate would make more than $700 000 from the drugs in Melbourne. "We estimate the heroin from four of the pellets has a wholesale value of $160 000 and once it is cut down it is worth $750 000", he said.
> (*The Age*, 27/09/2009)

The 'drug problem', according to Seddon, is the 'constellation of issues and difficulties associated with the production, distribution and consumption of illegal drugs'. He goes on to argue that 'it is perhaps the archetypal contemporary social problem' (2008: 717). The excerpts presented above, which originally appeared in Melbourne's two major daily newspapers, are prime examples of how the illicit drug problem has been conceptualised in the last few decades. Although such examples are confined to the specific context of Melbourne, the shifting nature of how this problem is portrayed across these two reports is reflective of a wider global trend. The first excerpt was published during the peak of Australia's perceived 'heroin crisis' – a crisis that 'stormed' (Anderson, 2005: 376) the open streets of mostly Vietnamese-concentrated areas in the inner city suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney during the mid to late 1990s. The

construction of the drug problem during this period was one that powerfully reflected the global 'war on drugs' rhetoric, whereupon drug trafficking was defined as a 'criminal activity' (Del Olmo, 1996: 42) and drug traffickers were constructed as the 'public enemy' (Green, 1996: 3). As illustrated by the excerpt, not only is the 'enemy' identified as 'Asian' and 'Vietnamese' but they are further vilified as 'gangs' who corrupt young 'schoolchildren to traffic heroin'. Framed within a narrative of moral depravity, this style of reportage was clearly pitched to create 'a sense of impending threat and utter crisis' (Rodd & Leber, 1997: 17) among the general public. This method proved effective because not only did such 'sustained media demonisation' (Beyer et al., 2002: 205) of drug traffickers create a deep sense of 'moral panic' among the broader community, but it also prompted reactionary 'tough on drugs' policies. For example, Beyer (2003) reports that in 1997/8, the arrest rates in Victoria for alleged heroin trafficking offences per 100,000 population of Vietnam-born young people aged 15-24 years were 4,301 compared to 83 for Australian-born.

Fast forward almost 15 years and while the Vietnamese continue to be implicated in Australia's drug problem, there has been a clear shift in the way in which the drug problem is now represented. Based on the second news article excerpt, the key pieces of information highlighted reflect contemporary understandings of drug trafficking as a 'commodity trade' rather than a 'criminal activity' (Del Olmo, 1996: 42), in which greater emphasis is placed on 'factual' details about the type of drugs seized, the drug's weight and purity levels, as well as its street-market value. Furthermore, while the Vietnamese were initially depicted as 'crime gangs' who prey on the vulnerable, subsequent reporting represented them as 'crime syndicates' who are purely driven by greed and profit. This recent reconceptualisation of drug traffickers – and the drug problem more generally – reflects the expanding role of neoliberal politics into the domain of crime control. A neoliberal ideology of drug trafficking *assumes* it to be 'an overly calculative and context-free vision of risk-decision making, neglecting to capture how risks and their perception are context-dependent' (Rhodes, 2002: 86).

Australia is one of a minority of countries that specify actual legal threshold quantities for distinguishing between drug offences with different penalty scales (Hughes et al., 2014). This is an incisive example of the powerful influence of neoliberal ideology in shaping drug laws and policies in Australia and internationally (Fleetwood, 2011).

‘Conviction by numbers’, as Harris (2011) puts it, is premised on the notion that ‘the quantity of drug involved [is] simply a reflection of the wider concepts of culpability and harm’ (Sentencing Council, 2011: 11). In other words, the employment of legal threshold quantities in sentencing practices ‘guarantee that drug offenders receive the sanction that they deserve’ (Hughes et al., 2014: 2). However, the ‘arbitrariness’ (Harris, 2011: 2) by which existing legal thresholds have been developed raises serious questions over their capacity to deliver proportional and effective sanctioning of drug traffickers. In Australia, the trafficable threshold – which is defined as the ‘amount giving rise to a presumption of intention to sell or supply’ (Hughes, 2010: 1) – not only vary by drug type but also differ between jurisdictions. Table 1 below presents the threshold for trafficable quantities of heroin, cocaine, amphetamines or methamphetamines across all States and Territories in Australia.

Table 1 Thresholds for trafficable quantities of heroin, cocaine, amphetamine, methamphetamine and MDMA, by drug type and jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction	**Type of drug**				
	Heroin	Cocaine	Amphetamine	Methamphetamine	MDMA
VIC	3g	3g	3g	3g	3g
QLD	2g	2g	2g	2g	2g
ACT	2g	2g	2g	2g	0.5g
TAS	25g	25g	25g	25g	25g
NSW	3g	3g	3g	3g	0.75g
WA	2g	2g	2g	2g	2g
NT	2g	2g	2g	2g	0.5g

Source: Hughes, C. (2010b) ‘Legislative thresholds for drug possession and traffic: An overview of State and Territory differences in Australia’, *DPMP Bulletin no.18*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre.

Compared to all other jurisdictions, which have set their trafficable thresholds at 2-3 grams for all illicit drugs, Tasmania adopts considerably higher thresholds and according to Hughes and colleagues, ‘reasons for such differences remain unknown’ (2014: 3). These threshold quantities play a significant role in the sentencing of drug offenders and yet, the ‘ad hoc and non-transparent’ manner in which they are calculated can ‘unwittingly lead to inappropriate or unjust sentencing of drug offenders’ (Hughes et al., 2014: 2). In the UK for example, Fleetwood (2011) problematises the neoliberal assumption that threshold quantities are indicative of seriousness of offending by demonstrating that professional traffickers were more likely to traffick smaller quantities of drugs than their less serious counterparts, which in her study, were drug mules.

A key criticism raised here is, and one that largely prompted the present inquiry, relates to the fact that both ‘moralistic’ and ‘neoliberal’ conceptualisations of the drug problem are grounded in a series of taken-for-granted assumptions about the motivations and circumstances surrounding drug traffickers’ involvement in the illicit drug trade. At its crudest, this has resulted in a situation where drug traffickers continue to be understood through the lens of nefarious stereotypes, depicting them as ‘heinous, evil individuals or groups that rule with an iron rod’ (Coomber, 2010: 10). Even though recent neoliberal models of crime control have, to a lesser or greater extent, shifted the conversation away from the language of morality to one of rationality, it still is, in Young’s words, ‘rhetoric substituting itself for reason’ (1999: 124). Amid a political climate that supports a punitive approach toward drug traffickers, combined with a neoliberal form of penal system that relies on empirically baseless legal threshold quantities, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of drug traffickers only serve to strengthen the justification for harsh sentencing policies (Fleetwood, 2011).

Taking these criticisms as the starting point for analysis, I aim to make up some much-needed empirical ground in this area by ‘bringing the [drug trafficker] to the foreground of drugs research’ (Green, 1996: 3) and understanding, from their point of view, the circumstances that shaped their pathways into, and subsequent roles within the illicit drug trade. This thesis is premised on the belief that drug trafficking is a ‘complex social phenomenon that is not easily reducible to a single measurement’ (Fleetwood, 2011: 376). By resituating the drug problem within a sociological paradigm, we are, in

Green's words, 'forced to understand drug trafficking differently' (1996: xiii). In close connection, this thesis also takes its cue from Phillips and Bowling's (2003) call for the development of a 'minority perspective', whereby researchers are urged to 'move beyond sterile debates centred on elevated rates of offending versus discriminatory criminal justice processing.' It would be remiss of researchers to ignore the fact that 'serious crimes have generated within minority community themselves' (Phillips and Bowling, 2003: 270-1).

Following these lines of inquiries, I specifically address the recent growing phenomenon of Vietnamese women who are incarcerated for drug-related crimes in Victoria, Australia. Recent data from the Statistical Profile of the Victorian Prison System report (2010) reveal that since June 2007, there has been a significant growth in Victoria's women prison population. A key trend in the significant growth of women prisoners has been the increase in women born in Vietnam. In fact, the report identifies that Vietnam-born women represent the highest proportion of prisoners born outside Australia. Table 1 below presents the number of Vietnam-born women prisoners in Victoria from June 2007 to July 2011.

Table 2 Total number of Vietnamese women in custody between June 2007 and July 2011

	30 June 2007		**30 June 2008**		**30 June 2009**		**30 June 2010**		**July 2011**	
	No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
Vietnam-born women	14	5.4	23	9.7	39	13.8	40	12.8	56	17.9%
Total women prisoner population	257	100.0	238	100.0	282	100.0	313	100.00	313	100.0

Source: Department of Justice (2011) Statistical Profile of the Victorian System Report.

As Table 2 clearly indicates, the number of Vietnam-born women prisoners significantly increased from 5.4 per cent in June 2007 to 17.9 per cent in July 2011. An additional key trend identified in the growth of women prisoners in Victoria has been the increase in women who are in custody for drug importation, domestic distribution or cultivation. This growing trend has occurred simultaneously with the increase in Vietnam-born women prisoners. As at 30 June 2010, a total of 62 (19.8%) women were

in custody for drug importation, domestic distribution or cultivation. At the commencement of this research in November 2010, there were a total of 56 (17.9%) Vietnamese women in custody and of the 56 women, 43 (13.7%) were in custody for drug-related offences. These statistics highlight two key findings:

- More than three quarters (76.8%) of Vietnamese women prisoners were in custody for drug importation, domestic distribution or cultivation.
- Of the total women prison population who were in custody for drug trafficking offences, 69.4% were Vietnamese.

Despite the high proportion of Vietnam-born women who are in custody for drug trafficking offences, there is currently no empirical research evidence that can shed some much-needed light on the core reasons behind this recent trend. In response to this significant gap in knowledge, I conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Vietnamese women who were imprisoned for drug trafficking crimes across two women's prison institutions in Victoria. In contrast to previous research which has predominantly focused on exploring drug traffickers' experiences according to a specific role within a particular type of drug market (for example, user-dealers in street-based heroin markets), this study was not restrictive in its recruitment and included women who had performed diverse roles across different drug markets. This is because the primary objective of this thesis is to unravel the circumstances that gave rise to the women's involvement in the illicit drug trade. Approaching the analysis from this standpoint distinguishes the present research from most other studies on drug dealing populations, which have predominantly concentrated on investigating the *modus operandi* of their drug dealing activities.

By focusing on the specific population of Vietnamese women, this research explores the interface between gender and ethnicity, particularly in terms of how they intersect with broader macro social, cultural and economic structures to influence women's pathways into, and experiences within the illicit drug trade. Furthermore, by foregrounding the specific, local context of Melbourne in the analysis, this research also draws on the work of Duff (2007, 2009), Fitzgerald (2009), Rhodes (2002) and Vitellone (2010) to elicit a nuanced understanding of how macro structural forces such as culture, politics

and economics are 'materalised, modified and turned back on themselves in [individual] local contexts' (Duff, 2007: 506). Underpinning each of these researchers' analyses is the notion of 'risk and enabling environments' in the context of drug-related harm. Rhodes, for example, emphasises that:

> A focus on the risk environment encourages us to think about the social situations and places in which harm is produced and reduced. We can define the risk environment as the space – whether social or physical – in which a variety of factors interact to increase the chances of drug-related harm…this inevitably leads to a consideration of non-drug and non-health oriented interventions' in harm reduction. Shifts in housing policy, for example, may have harm reduction impact, as have a variety of micro-economic, employment and other community development initiatives' (2002: 88).

Adopting Duff's conceptualisation of context, which he defines as 'an assemblage of spaces, modes of embodiment and relations of practice' (2007: 507), this research also investigates – through the women's narratives – if and how certain physical and social spaces in the specific urban setting of Melbourne mediate Vietnamese women's involvement in drug trafficking.

Taking all this into account, this thesis explores the following research questions from the perspectives of the women themselves:

(1) What are the key circumstances surrounding Vietnamese women in Australia prior to their incarceration and what is the relationship of these circumstances to their involvement in drug trafficking?

(2) How are the opportunities for Vietnamese women to enter the illicit drug trade shaped by, and determined by their ethnicity?

(3) How do Vietnamese women in Australia perceive the risks associated with drug trafficking? More specifically, how are coercion, victimisation, choice and agency constituted in the context of Vietnamese women's movement into, and participation within the illicit drug trade?

By categorising the women under the broad umbrella of 'Vietnamese', I am in no way working under the assumption that they belong to a 'homogenous, coherent and stable' group (Thomas, 1999: xiii). While I have used the term 'Vietnamese' to represent a

specific ethnic identity, this study is grounded in the sociological understanding that identities are 'relational, contextual and fluid' (Thomas, 1999: xiii). As Hall argues, 'individuals speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture' (Hall, 1988: 258). This last point was also articulated by some of the women in this study, such as Phúc, who, in commenting on the population of Vietnamese women prisoners, emphasised, 'All the Vietnamese women in here come from different backgrounds and circumstances. It's not like we come from the same family'. While I acknowledge the diversities that exist among Vietnamese lives in Australia, this study builds on the work of Garland and colleagues (2006), which highlights the importance of articulating the shared experiences of minority groups. More specifically, these authors point to the problematic nature of adopting a position that purely articulates difference within groups. In their own words:

> One issue that a researcher must confront when carrying out work within hidden minorities is how to articulate the specific experiences of individuals who belong to wider minority ethnic groups without adopting a wholly relativistic position that loses political power contained within umbrella terms such as 'Black' or 'minority ethnic'. (2006: 430)

Many of the women in this study routinely identified themselves, and their experiences, as being uniquely associated with a Vietnamese cultural identity. Throughout our interviews, the women would often preface their narratives with statements such as 'Us Vietnamese people' or 'You know how us Vietnamese people function'. The women would further distinguish their experiences from other ethnic groups, stating that, 'the Westerners are different from us'. If the growing issue of Vietnamese women's participation in Australia's illicit drug trade is to be fully addressed by governments, policy-makers, community-based organisations, service-providers and researchers alike, then it is imperative that studies are geared towards investigating the commonalities that underpin Vietnamese women's pathways into the illicit drug trade.

Thesis Outline

Chapter Two provides an overview of the two dominant approaches that currently underpin contemporary understandings of the drug problem: the political ideology of a 'war on drugs' approach and a market-oriented economic approach. A central argument emerging from this chapter pertains to the exclusion of drug traffickers – particularly ethnic minorities and women – in illicit drugs research. This has allowed for the perpetuation of myths and misconceptions about their character and motivations to permeate popular ideology. I argue that in order to avoid one-dimensional 'commonsense assumptions', it is critical that the drug problem is resituated within an alternative framework that draws on the perspectives of drug traffickers themselves.

Chapter Three provides the contextual background of Vietnamese lives in Australia, including an historical overview of Vietnamese arrival and resettlement in Australia, followed by a description of their contemporary social, cultural and economic worlds. This chapter is guided by the conviction that in order to obtain a comprehensive view of individuals' pathways into drug trafficking, analysis must be directed towards an understanding of the social and cultural landscapes in which they carry out their day-to-day lives.

In Chapter Four, I describe the methodology of the present research. The chapter begins with an account of the qualitative approach towards the study of drug traffickers, the type of data collected in this study and how the data were analysed. It also describes key methodological and analytical issues encountered during the journey of bringing this research to fruition. For the purpose of methodological transparency, it was important that I located myself in relation to the present research, especially as I share the same ethnicity and cultural background as my research participants.

In the next three chapters, I present the findings of the research. Chapter Five introduces the women who participated in this study, both in terms of who they are as individuals and as part of a larger group of Vietnamese women in Australia. Specifically, this chapter is concerned with taking the analysis of drug trafficking outside the realm of the 'drug market' and understanding, from the women's perspectives, the broader cultural, social and economic circumstances that shaped their pathways into the illicit drug trade.

Chapter Six presents the narratives of participants who joined the drugs pathway in a desperate bid to resolve debts incurred through casino gambling. It describes the key reasons for going to the casino followed by an in-depth account of how casino gambling provides both the motivation and opportunity for drug-related crime.

Chapter Seven presents the narratives of participants who described alternative pathways into the illicit drug trade. It first describes the motives and circumstances that drove these participants into the drug trade followed by an analysis of the process through which they made contact with drug distribution networks, as well as their subsequent experiences of working in the illicit drug trade.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by drawing together the key themes and arguments of the study. Specifically, I argue that drug trafficking is a 'complex social phenomenon' and it was only through a qualitative paradigm that I was able to obtain 'new insights and alternative understandings' that moved beyond stereotypical – and often fallacious – representations of drug traffickers, especially of ethnic minority women.

CHAPTER TWO
Drug trafficking, ethnic minorities and women

Given the transnational nature of the illicit drug trade, combined with its multifaceted dimensions, the question of how the 'drug problem' should be tackled has been a source of considerable debate within and across academic, law enforcement and government circles. As Seddon observes:

> For many politicians and policymakers, explanations and solutions are best articulated using the language of morality. For others, the drug problem is fundamentally a matter of public health. For yet others, the discourse of crime provides the most appropriate framework for considering and dealing with the issue. (2008: 717)

To contextualise the complex nature of this phenomenon, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of the dominant approaches currently underpinning both popular and academic discourses on drug trafficking. A central argument emerging from this review and critique pertains to the significant gap in empirical knowledge on drug traffickers – particularly ethnic minorities and women – whereby discussions are generally tainted by 'influential myths' rather than 'tested against evidence' (Denton, 2001: 4). This last point raises serious questions over current drug policies and penal sanctions for drug traffickers, especially in countries like Australia where drug trafficking sentencing guidelines are less concerned with offenders' personal circumstances and more preoccupied with 'ad hoc and non-transparent' legal threshold quantities (Hughes et al., 2014: 2).

2.1 The global illicit drug trade

The global trade in illegal drugs is a lucrative business. Due to its clandestine and illegal nature, direct measurement of its various dimensions such as production, distribution, consumption and prices is impossible (Coomber, 2007; Thoumi, 2005; Wagstaff, 1989). Nevertheless, statistical figures continue to get 'thrown around with ease' (Reuter, 2000: 2) and disguised as 'hard facts' (Wagstaff, 1989: 1173) during discussions on the

magnitude of the global illicit drug trade. Reuter observes that ‘even publications as sceptical and numerate as *The Economist*’ (Reuter, 2000: 2) offer standard estimates of the global illicit drug trade, which is often reported to be valued at $US 300 billion to $US 500 billion. Most estimates, according to Thoumi (2005), are based on figures produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – the world’s main drug data source. Thoumi suggests that the ‘technical aura’ surrounding the United Nations (UN) means that ‘most researchers, journalists and policy-makers’ largely consider its data as ‘reliable, authoritative and objective’ (2005: 188). Yet not even the UN is immune to inconsistent and unreliable data given the illegal nature of the drug business. Overall, Thoumi argues that the preoccupation with the ‘numbers game’ is, above all else, a reflection of political bias. The hard line ‘war on drugs’ is a prime example of how members of the political domain manipulate illicit drug data as a strategy to influence public opinion.

2.2 The ‘war on drugs’ and the demonisation of drug traffickers

Drug traffickers are often depicted in ways that differentiate them from ‘normal’ people (Coomber, 2007: 749). Despite the paucity of academic inquiry into the world of drug traffickers, it is surprising to witness how politicians, journalists, law enforcement officers and some academics around the world confidently conceptualise them through ‘ungrounded’ (Green, 1991: 3) negative stereotypes. Commenting on the British context in the 1980s, Green describes how some politicians blatantly labelled drug traffickers as ‘merchants of death’, ‘despicable people’ and ‘evil men and women’ as a way to mobilise public support for harsher judicial punishment (Green, 1996: 6).

To date, the academic domain has produced very little empirical research on drug traffickers. This in turn has allowed for the perpetuation of the ‘evil’ and ‘morally depraved’ image of drug traffickers to permeate popular ideology. The conviction with which drug traffickers are demonised, despite relatively little research being undertaken on them, can be attributed to the US-led global ‘war on drugs’, which was spearheaded by President Richard Nixon in 1972 and later crystallised in its current political form under President Ronald Reagan in 1986 (Fleetwood, 2011; Merolla, 2008; Sudbury, 2002).

The basic premise for the 'war on drugs' was to eradicate drug use in the US as evidenced by the establishment of the *Anti-Drug Abuse Act 1986* (Merolla, 2008; Sudbury, 2002). What followed was a 'critical break' (Sudbury, 2002: 64) in the construction of the drug problem; no longer were drug users conceptualised as a 'medical population in need of treatment' but rather, a 'criminal population' in which the only recourse for action was through a punitive zero tolerance approach (Sudbury, 2002: 64). Such logic, Sudbury argues, is based on 'the erroneous assumption that users would be deterred from their habit and dealers and traffickers incapacitated by punitive and extensive use of penal sanctions' (2002: 64). By implication, drug networks would have their operations severely disrupted, resulting in fewer drugs on the street. While this draconian method of drug control has been the subject of much criticism, with many commentators calling it a failure (see, for example Baum, 1997; Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Cardoso et al., 2009), it is clear that the 'war on drugs' is a very powerful tool in galvanising public demonisation of drug traffickers.

The influence of the US model of drug control in shaping the global political anti-drug discourse has been so great that Fleetwood points out that 'sentencing practices for drug trafficking are fairly convergent worldwide' (2011: 379). Most (western) countries consider the drug problem as 'an urgent matter of national security' upon which the drug trafficker is constructed as the 'external threat' (Del Olmo, 1996: 33), or in Green's words, much 'like a terrorist' (1991: 3). Moreover, Green argues that 'the arrest, conviction and punishment of the drug trafficker, is somehow seen as the embodiment of the state's assault on what it is argued, has already been defined as a central social problem…it is a public reminder of common unity against a common enemy' (1996: 3-4). If drug traffickers are the so-called 'enemy' in this 'war on drugs', the question is, who are these drug traffickers? A review of the mainstream media and academic discourse on illicit drugs reveals that minority and immigrant groups have long been the target of blame for a country's drug problem (Green, 1996: 16). As Potter puts it, it is more 'palatable' to externalise a country's drug problem as an 'alien' problem than to suggest that 'native demands for illicit drugs invite the creation of organised crime' (1994: 10). In this respect, the 'war on drugs' has effectively 'morphed into a war on minorities and immigrants' (Sirin, 2011: 84).

2.2.1 The war on drugs wages a war on minority and immigrant groups

The 'strong ethnic connotations' (Bovenkerk et al., 2003: 23) framing both popular and academic discourse on drug trafficking have both 'political and analytical significance' (Paoli & Reuter, 2008: 14). In the context of a 'war on drugs', constructing the 'drug problem' as an 'ethnic problem' has allowed the political to take centre stage while any critical analysis of the association – 'real or imagined' (Ruggiero & South, 1997: 64) – between particular minority and immigrant groups with illicit drugs has taken a backseat. Bovenkerk and colleagues further note:

> The ethnic model provides the police and even more importantly the media with a simple framework for categorising the underworld in homogenous units, which are easier objects for police intervention and media consumption. (2003: 24)

It must be acknowledged that the association between certain minority and immigrant groups with drug-related crimes predates Reagan's campaign for a 'war on drugs'. For example, it has been well documented that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants in the US, Canada, Britain and Australia were singled out as the key smokers, distributors and manufacturers of opium (Coomber, 2006; Manderson, 1999; Ruggiero & South, 1997; Sirin, 2011). According to Manderson, 'the smoking of opium was therefore clearly identified as the habit, ubiquitous and unique, of an alien minority' (1999: 181). Redirecting blame on 'others' has thus been a longstanding trend and one that is mirrored across most parts of the world: the French blamed the Russians; the British 'spoke mysteriously of the threat from the East' (Hobbs, 1998: 407-8)[1] while Australians constructed the drug problem as an 'Asian drug problem' (Manderson, 1999: 184).

If drug-related crimes, particularly in the supply and distribution of drugs, have always been constructed in a way that 'conveniently excludes [the host country] from taking responsibilities for its own maladies' (Hobbs, 1998: 408), what effect has the 'war on drugs' had on minority and immigrant groups? The most visible and immediate impact is reflected in criminal justice statistics, whereby minority and immigrant groups are widely identified as being disproportionately overrepresented in the prison population.

[1] Hobbs notes that it was only 'the Italians [who] saw the phenomenon as a home-grown phenomenon and for them, the Italian experience was the sole authentic one' (1998: 408).

Politically speaking, researchers Sirin (2011) and Paoli and Reuter (2008) argue that such statistics provide political ammunition for nationalist parties to 'attack immigration' on the grounds that it threatens the host country's welfare. For example, Sirin argues that in the US, 'right-wing ideologues have been increasingly associating immigrants and minorities with criminal activity as a means to push a hard line policy agenda concerning immigration' (2011: 85). One recent example Sirin provides is the controversial Arizona immigration law signed by Governor Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010, in which individuals belonging to the Latin community were the key targets. Initially designed to 'identify, prosecute, and deport illegal immigrants' (Sirin, 2011: 85), this law gave police officers the authority to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally if they did not carry appropriate immigration papers at all times.

In the academic domain, the validity of criminal justice statistics has been criticised on the grounds that rather than representing real patterns of drug offending among minority and immigrant groups, such statistics are more reflective of bias in law enforcement operations (Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Murji, 2007; Paoli & Reuter, 2008). According to Bobo and Thompson, law enforcement officers are under enormous pressure to show progress within a political climate that prioritises a 'tough on drugs' (2006: 451) approach. The authors argue that 'the quickest way to show results is to enhance policing and arrest in already disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which [in the US] are disproportionately poor and black' (2006: 451).

The critique of official crime statistics has added great value to the minority/immigrant drug crime debate. However, the problem with this strand of analyses is that in their quest to unveil the biases that underscore criminal justice systems, researchers have failed to recognise the fact that drug trafficking *is* a problem that exists among certain minority and immigrant groups. As Braithwaite notes, this is one of several 'strong' and 'consistently supported associations in empirical criminology' (1989: 44). In the same vein, Ruggiero and Khan observe that 'a large body of literature focuses on racist perceptions and stereotypes, surrounding the issues of ethnicity, crime and drugs rather than, explicitly, on ethnic minorities, crime and drugs' (2006: 474). For example, Columbian groups are identified as the key traffickers of cocaine in both the Netherlands (Zaitch, 2002) and the US (Decker & Chapman, 2008); Bangladeshi groups are largely involved in the retail level of Britain's heroin trade (Akhtar & South, 2000)

while Turkish and Albanian groups are recognised as the main importers of heroin to Europe (Paoli & Reuter, 2008). Based on this observation, Phillips and Bowling aptly argue that criminological research 'should not be solely dominated by the polemical and now sterile debate centred on elevated rates of offending versus discriminatory criminal justice processing' (2003: 270).

While much has been said on the political and racial bias underscoring the dominant approaches to the 'drug problem', none of this has been meaningful in terms of understanding the experiences of drug traffickers themselves. The paucity of information on drug traffickers, according to Green, is particularly surprising 'given the policy and intellectual interest that the subject of drug trafficking elicits' (1996: xiii). The empirical gap in knowledge about drug traffickers, rather than being filled, has in fact widened in recent years as a result of the ever-increasing popular market-oriented approach towards the study of drug trafficking.

2.3 Drug trafficking as a 'commodity trade': 'It's all about the money stupid'

Given the complex nature of the 'drug problem', Del Olmo emphasises that 'a thorough analysis requires focusing on many different, though equally important angles' (1993: 2). However, just as the political and policing domains have been dictated by the one-dimensional, hard line 'war on drugs' approach, the academic domain has, for the most part, also taken on a narrow view of the drug problem. Since the 1980s, an ever-increasing number of studies have reconceptualised drug trafficking from a 'criminal activity' to a 'commodity trade' (Del Olmo, 1996: 42), which means that observations about the drug problem are increasingly viewed through the prism of economics. This thesis does not discount the significance of conceptualising the drug problem through an economic framework, as it shares Seddon's view that 'one of the most obvious characteristics of drugs [is] that they are commodities with economic value' (2008: 717). Relatedly, Murji points out that 'at the most banal level, all drug transactions are market relations in that they entail an exchange between sellers, buyers, traders, and so on' (2007: 782). However, an overemphasis on the economic processes of drug trafficking has resulted in a situation where drug traffickers – a key dimension of the drug problem – have been relegated to the margins of research. This has consequently allowed more

space for 'false and sensationalist data' (Del Olmo, 1993: 1) on drug traffickers to permeate both popular, political and academic discourse.

In a recent international review, Ritter identifies five different disciplinary approaches to studying drug trafficking: ethnographic and qualitative approaches; economic approaches; behavioural and psychological research; population-based and survey research (also known as epidemiology and surveillance research); and criminology and law enforcement evaluation (2006: 453). Despite each discipline having '[its] own language, theory and methods' (2006: 453), the 'market' is predominantly the starting point from which all disciplines approached the drug problem. In effect, 'drug trafficking as a market' (Fleetwood, 2011: 376) has become the 'dominant motif' (Murji, 2007: 782) across most enquiries into the illicit drug trade.

From a market-oriented perspective, the drug problem is understood through central economic concepts such as 'price, purity and availability' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010a: 84). Ruggiero and South point out that although sociologists and criminologists are justified – to some extent – in discursively viewing illicit drug markets as 'strange, other worlds', they argue that overall, illicit drug markets *do* share characteristics with other licit markets' (1997: 55). Based on this view, illicit drug markets are considered just like any other market and are thus regarded as conforming to the elementary neoclassical economic principles of supply and demand: supply increases when prices rise and decreases when prices fall, and demand falls when prices rise and increases when prices fall (Moore et al., 2005). Ritter argues that such an economic market model provides a 'useful window' into the inner workings of the illicit drug trade, particularly in terms of understanding 'the motivations, opportunities and decisions of economic actors participating in a market' (2006: 455). In countering this view, Garland vociferously argues that when the drug problem is primarily understood as a function of market indicators, then offenders are simplistically regarded as 'rational opportunists or career criminals whose conduct is variously deterred or dis-inhibited by the manipulation of incentives' (2001: 130). In other words, the motivations of offenders are stripped bare of any complex social explanations. Garland further argues:

> The penological corollary of this is that the concern with 'root causes', 'social problems' and 'individual needs' is displaced by a more singular focus upon 'pricing', and the

> effort to ensure that the penal consequences of criminal offending are swift, certain, and severe to operate as an effective disincentive. (2001: 130)

Such market-driven ideologies provide the perfect shorthand tool for politicians, governments and legislators to justify punitive policies and sanctions toward drug traffickers without having to draw on any hard empirical evidence. The most valuable question raised within a neoliberal model of crime control is, 'what do we know about illicit drug markets and how can we influence them?' as reflected by the Matrix Knowledge Group report (2008) in the UK and the Drug Policy Modelling Project (2005) in Australia. The 'risks and prices' framework is the main reference used by policy makers and drug enforcement officers to understand how best to disrupt the flow and supply of illicit drugs within and across national borders. Caulkins and MacCoun describe the basic tenets of the 'risks and prices' model:

> The risks and prices framework views enforcement as a sort of tax that drives up the cost of distributing drugs. Since drug dealers are essentially business people, one would expect them to pass those higher costs along to consumers in the form of higher prices. Both before and after any change in the amount of enforcement, drug dealers are viewed as having made a rational choice. They considered the risks. They considered the rewards (primarily monetary). And they chose the bundle of risks and rewards associated with dealing over whatever the alternative was. Raising the risks makes the bundle look less attractive, so to preserve an equilibrium in which the marginal individual is indifferent between choosing the risky bundle and the less risky default alternative, rewards must rise when risks do. (Caulkins & MacCoun, 2003: 434-435)

In an effort to redress mounting criticisms about the assumptions of rationality and perfect information, contemporary economists of drug markets have introduced the notion of bounded rationality (Dwyer & Moore, 2010b), which, according to Desroches, is premised on the hypothesis that:

> [L]imitations on people's ability to process information place constraints on decision processes that force them to make simplifications and shortcuts that may appear reasonable at the time, but which can produce inferior outcomes. Offenders are influenced by such factors such as drug usage, peer pressure, and emotional or economic depression. (2005: 57)

Nevertheless, Dwyer and Moore – who urge scholars of illicit drug markets to move beyond rational choice accounts – observe that too much emphasis is still placed on 'risks and prices' (2010b: 391).

A recent line of inquiry observes that prices do not necessarily represent the risk associated with being arrested and imprisoned. In the US, for example, Caulkins and Reuter observe that 'prices have declined despite very substantial increases in enforcement stringency' (2006: 2). In Australia, Maher and colleagues report different 'half-weights [half-gram]' for different customers; that is, 'Asian halves' and 'Aussie halves', the latter being underweight, pejorative and reserved for 'Aussie junkies' (1998: 9). In Ecuador, Fleetwood's (2011) interviews with incarcerated drug traffickers show that more serious offenders do not necessarily carry larger quantities of drugs. Specifically, 'mules' generally carry larger quantities than professional traffickers, mostly because they do not know how much they are carrying. As a result, sentence guidelines based on weight – consistent with neoclassical orthodoxy – punish less serious offenders more heavily (Fleetwood, 2011: 375).

A substantial body of qualitative and ethnographic research further challenges the economic approach towards the study of illicit drug markets by highlighting that far from being comprised of 'anonymous buyers and sellers who compete for scarce resources' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010b: 393), drug markets are 'embedded' in social relationships, reputation and trust. In the US, for example, Adler – in her ethnographic study of an upper-level dealing and smuggling community in south-western California – observes:

> Dealing circles were generally very close, tightly knit groups who were mutually compatible personally, socially, and demographically. They attracted people of roughly the same age, race and ethnic origin, who conducted their business along similar standards of security, reliability, involvement and commitment. (1985: 71)

In relation to buyer/seller relationships, the dealers and smugglers in Adler's study emphasise that 'trust is a risky business' and were thus 'wary of selling to new faces since this represented the most dangerous form of exchange' (1985: 72). In Australia, Denton and O'Malley's study of women drug dealers in Melbourne identifies that 'trust was central to the occupational mythology of the industry, and becoming a successful

dealer depended on establishing a reputation of reliability' and 'doing the right thing by customers' (1999: 520). Similarly, Dwyer and Moore's anthropological analysis of a predominantly Vietnamese street-based heroin market in Melbourne highlights 'differential exchange opportunities based on social relations between buyers and sellers' (2010b: 393). More specifically:

> [W]ithin any given round of heroin selling, dealers varied prices according to categorisations of customers as *regulars, good customers* (people who purchased regularly and always paid the asking price), *locals* (people who were in the marketplace regularly and were well-known) and *blow-ins* (people who came to the marketplace intermittently and were therefore unknown). Discounted prices were also available to other Vietnamese dealers who, for various reasons, were temporarily unable to procure a larger weight of heroin. This differential opportunity, based on shared ethnic identity, reproduced and reinforced social distance between *Viet* [Vietnamese] and *Aussies* in this marketplace. (Dwyer & Moore, 2010b: 393)

Progress in obtaining more 'thick descriptions' (Murji, 2007: 784) on the lives of drug traffickers outside the realm of the neoliberal-driven market is further hampered by the recent surge in research that increasingly 'represent [drug traffickers] through undifferentiated categorical descriptions, merely implicit and under-theorised or in some cases, entirely absent' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010a: 90). For example, Pearson and Hobbs' research on Britain's middle market drug distribution does not shed any light on the characteristics or issues surrounding drug traffickers other than that they are 'Turkish' and control 80-90 per cent of heroin entering the UK (2001: 19). Similarly, Degenhardt and colleagues' evaluation of the Australian heroin market does not discuss drug traffickers beyond the general ethnic descriptor of 'South-East Asian crime groups' (2005: 6). In response to the use of these overly simplistic ethnic categories in the context of drug trafficking, Murji puts forward the argument that:

> [T]he people [that the descriptors] are intended to describe may not even be nationals of those countries. For example, in Europe the term 'ethnic Turkish' refers to descent rather than nationality. Whether or not they are, or see themselves as, an 'ethnic' group is uncertain. Even to whatever extent that might be the case, ethnicity is not homogenous or undivided by gender and class factors, as well as regional origins. (2007: 784)

It has been suggested that the absence of drug traffickers' perspectives in research reflects practical issues associated with research methodology (Coomber, 2007). However, based on the current market trend characterising illicit drugs studies, a more likely explanation as to why drug traffickers are not brought to the fore of research is, to put simply, not necessary given the 'overly homogenous view' (Coomber & Maher, 2006: 720) that money 'is the most obvious motive' (Desroches, 2005: 53). This is clearly exemplified in the following statement by Sir Stephen Lander, Chair of the UK's Serious and Organised Crime Association: 'it's all about the money stupid. The organised criminals are doing this for the money' (Lander cited in Fleetwood, 2011: 375).

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of researchers who have spoken out against the ways in which the political and law enforcement domains, as well as various academic disciplines, uncritically accept fallacious stereotypes about illicit drug markets and drug traffickers as 'truths' (Coomber & Maher, 2006). Coomber (2010), in his rallying calls for a reconceptualisation of drug markets and drug traffickers , aptly argues:

> As with all abstractions and simplifications, once you start to look closely at what is under discussion, you begin to see where 'theory' and/or assumption become confounded by detail. A close look at what actually happens in drug markets (who the dealers are, what the dealers do to the drugs they sell, how the markets are structured, how actors in the market act) reveals a different picture that contradicts the many assumptions of what the drug market is supposed to be. (Coomber, 2010: 10)

This thesis takes its cue from Coomber's (2010) call for a change in the way drug traffickers are currently conceptualised. In line with this argument, Dwyer and Moore (2010a, 2010b) contend that this can only be achieved if the drug problem is situated in its full cultural and socio-economic context. As Browne and colleagues point out, 'such a complex phenomenon requires a multi-dimensional response' (2003: 325).

2.4 Taking the 'evil' out of the drug trafficker: A social and cultural perspective

The supply-side of the drug problem involves 'a wide range of people, from organised

trafficking in large quantities through to opportunistic criminals dealing in smaller amounts' (Browne et al., 2003: 325). However, in comparison to drug users, the knowledge base of drug traffickers is 'pitifully thin' (Pearson & Hobbs, 2003: 335). In the few studies that do focus on drug traffickers, Desroches observes that most have focused on 'low-level dealers who sell directly to the consumer or drug user' (2005: 2) at the retail, or street-level dealing. Pearson and Hobbs (2001) and Coomber and Maher (2006) further point out that most studies have generally been geographically confined to the North American context. Nonetheless, while the illicit drugs field has yet to produce any substantial knowledge on mid-high level drug traffickers (though see Adler, 1985; Beyer, 2004; Desroches, 2005; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001; Reuter & Haaga, 1989), the extant literature on user-dealers – that is, individuals who sell drugs to support a drug dependency - has illuminated much-needed light on the cultural and social dimension of the drug problem (Dwyer, 2009; Maher & Dixon, 1999)

2.4.1 The sociocultural worlds of user-dealers

One of the earliest socio-cultural portrayals of the drug problem emanated from US studies on drug use and 'addiction'. The 'first study of significance' (Ruggiero & South, 1997: 58) to shed new light on the drug problem was conducted by Dai in 1937. Challenging the then overarching psychological and psychiatric model of the drug user as passive and irrational, Dai's study articulates the link between the problem of opiate use in Chicago and experiences of disadvantage such as poor housing, low socio-economic status and disrupted family life. In the decades that followed, particularly from the late 60s and onwards, a new wave of researchers turned their attention to the subculture of local retail drug markets in 'slum neighborhoods' (Feldman, 1968: 131). Pioneering studies of this genre were conducted by US researchers Feldman in 1968, followed by Preble and Casey in 1969. Challenging pathological reductionist interpretations, Feldman emphasises that 'movement into illicit drug use should involve an understanding of [the] immediate social context…which provides major clues to what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour' (1968: 131). Relatedly, Preble and Casey contend that rather than being 'an escape from life', drug users engage in a 'quest for a meaningful life…and the meaning does not lie, primarily, in the effects of

the drug on their minds and their bodies; it lies in the gratification of accomplishing a series of challenging, exciting tasks, every day of the week' (1969: 3).

Since the publication of Feldman (1968) and Preble and Casey (1969), a number of ethnographic and anthropological studies (Akhtar & South, 2000; Bourgois, 2003; Denton, 2001; Dwyer, 2009; Maher, 1997; Sandberg, 2008) have routinely recast the drug user under the sociological spotlight in an effort to 'bring together the particularities of identity with the wider structural conditions that shape lives' (Murji, 2007: 784). Apart from acquisitive offending, the most common type of crime that drug users often turn to in order to support their drug use is drug dealing – particularly in open street drug markets (Desroches, 2005; Seddon, 2006). Knowledge about the sociocultural dynamics underpinning retail-level street drug markets is typically drawn from US and UK studies, most of which emerged during the 1980s and 1990s when the heroin-crack-cocaine epidemic 'stormed the urban landscape' (Anderson, 2005: 376). According to Seddon (2006), three intersecting issues underpinned the North American and British drug problem: problematic drug use, drug-related crime and urban poverty. Commenting on Britain's heroin problem during the 1980s, Seddon points out:

> … many of the [drug users] were becoming involved in lifestyles involving drug dealing, prostitution, and especially acquisitive crimes…consequently, neighbourhoods affected by a heroin outbreak typically experienced a clustering together of social difficulties: high unemployment, high crime rates, heroin dealing and heroin use. (2006: 683)

Similarly, Maher's observation of the crack cocaine scene in the streets of Bushwick in New York City 'attests to the salience of crack distribution and sales activity as a source of income generation among drug users in the inner city' (1997: 84). Seddon (2006) notes that the nexus between drug use, crime and urban poverty continues to be a primary concern in contemporary North America and Britain. However, not all drug problems experienced in other parts of the world or even in other areas within the US and UK are characterised by the intersecting issues of drug use, crime and poverty. This is a limitation identified by Ritter, who contends that 'each market is unique and one cannot assume that operations in one market (both in terms of geography and person) can be applied to another market – even if it is the same drug' (2006: 455). Coomber and Maher reiterate this point in stating that a 'fixed view' of drug markets is simply not

helpful, even 'within the same geographical location over time' (2006: 721). Such arguments are empirically demonstrated by Valdez and Kaplan (2007), who, in their study of Mexican-Americans in a South Texas drug market, argue that abstractions cannot be drawn from 'single areas like New York' because:

> …it excludes how issues such as levels of economic disparity, ethnic composition, opportunity structures, institutional completeness, geographical characteristics, and political factors may influence the drug markets. (2007: 898)

Although the literature acknowledges that 'drug markets can and do vary widely in characteristics' (Taylor & Potter, 2013: 2), knowledge pertaining to *why* individuals initiate into drug trafficking continues to be attributed to broader structural explanations of 'exceedingly high levels of poverty and inequality' (Valdez & Kaplan, 2007: 908). This is largely because the profile of drug traffickers under investigation are generally economically vulnerable, and live in neighbourhoods 'already suffering from multiple socio-economic difficulties' (Seddon, 2006: 681). Nevertheless, locating the drug problem within the context of poverty has given rise to more sophisticated analyses into how issues of marginalisation and exclusion play a key role in mediating individuals into the illicit drug trade.

2.4.2 Exclusion, marginalisation and blocked opportunity structures

The experience of exclusion and marginalisation, as conditions that promote involvement in the illicit drug trade, embodies a key dimension of the political economic perspective of understanding the drug problem. Political economy, in Dwyer's words, is 'concerned with connections between economic systems (systems of production, distribution and consumption of material resources) and with political systems (local, national and global systems of power)'(2009: 42). In the context of drug trafficking, a political economic analysis seeks to understand how broader political economic structures such as 'economic development, housing, labour, migration, health, education and welfare' (Dwyer, 2009: 42) impact on individuals' everyday lives and subsequently shape their decisions to become involved in illicit drug markets.

Bourgois, in his ethnographic study of Puerto Rican crack dealers in New York's East Harlem between 1985 and 1992, illustrates how drug trafficking is above all, an

'expression of deeper, structural dilemmas' (Bourgois, 2003: 319). In his own words, Bourgois observes:

> In urban US settings, crack is a function of what I call "inner city apartheid," It is disproportionately concentrated on the blocks surrounding public housing, on sex worker strolls and on burnt out vacation lots. This explanation is consistent and appealing from a political economic perspective. By virtually any economic or social welfare measure available, the most exploited population groups suffering from the most intense forms of systematic racial discrimination and spatial segregation are predictably those with the highest proportion of crack addicts. (2003: 32).

According to Bourgois, the crack-cocaine-heroin epidemics of the late-1980s through mid-1990s – which he notes were 'qualitatively worse than the narcotics and alcohol scourges of most previous generations' (2003: 319) – had their 'structural roots' (2003: 319) in the global restructuring of the world's economic system. The neoliberal driven globalising process saw the 'economic base of the traditional working class erode throughout the country' (2003: 319), which unfavourably escalated or created new patterns of inequalities around class, ethnicity and gender. Drug trafficking, in this sense, provided the Puerto Rican crack dealers 'alternative work in alternative markets' (Ruggiero & South, 1997: 59) as a means to generate income – income that was otherwise unattainable in the legitimate economy. By presenting drug traffickers in this light, Bourgois attempts to humanise, while at the same time, demystify the all-encompassing belief that drug traffickers are 'exotic others operating in an irrational world' (2003: 326). As he further argues:

> I want to place drug dealers and street-level criminals into their rightful position within the mainstream of US society…they are "made in America"… Like most people in the United States, drug dealers and street criminals are scrambling to obtain their piece of the pie as fast as possible. In fact, in their pursuit of success they are even following the minute details of the classical Yankee model for upward mobility. (2003: 326)

The 'Yankee model of upward mobility' to which Bourgois refers to is reminiscent of Merton's functionalist theory of 'social structure and anomie', which was first presented in 1938 as a sociological alternative to biological explanations of deviant behaviour. Central to Merton's theory is the concept of 'anomie', a sociological concept introduced by Durkheim (Featherstone & Deflem, 2003: 477) to explain a type of suicide

associated with a complex, industrial society (Clinard, 1964). Merton's reconceptualisation of 'anomie' expanded Durkheim's usage of the term by applying it to 'a wide variety of deviant behaviour' (Hilbert, 1989: 243) including crime.

For Merton, the 'social genesis' (1938: 676) of crime – among other types of deviant behaviour – 'lies in discovering how some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct' (1938: 672). Merton developed his theory in response to the observation that American culture places 'extreme pressure' (1938: 675) on all of its citizens to achieve the highly valued goal of 'pecuniary success' (1938: 678), which is captured in the notion of the 'American Dream'. Subsequently, less emphasis is placed on institutionally legitimate means of attaining such goals. Holding Merton's theory together is the assumption that such values and goals are 'absorbed' (1938: 678) by most members of society. Anomie therefore arises when there is an 'acute disjunction' (Merton, 1968: 162) between the dominant cultural goal of pecuniary success and legitimate access to opportunities that allows such goals to be realised. According to Merton, this is a predicament that is most pronounced among the working-class:

> The limitation of opportunity to unskilled labour and the resultant low income cannot compete in terms of conventional standards of achievement with the high income from organised vice. (1938: 679)

Confronted by this situation, Merton posits that engagement in deviant activities such as crime for economic gain is an innovative[2] and 'normal response' for individuals who wish to pursue the 'American Dream' but lack the conventional means to do so.

Merton's theory of anomie is certainly not without its critics. In fact, Rosenfield reports that there are several volumes of criticism devoted to Merton's broader paradigm of social structure and anomie. As Rosenfield notes:

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[2] In total, Merton (1938: 676-79) developed a typology of five different modes of individual adaptations (or adjustments) to conditions of anomie. Conformity is the most common and widely diffused mode of adaptation. It is the conformity to both cultural goals and means. Among the deviant alternatives is innovation, which refers to the acceptance of goals but the rejection of means. Retreatism is the least common and is the rejection of both goals and means. Rebellion refers to the rejection and substitution of new goals and means. Ritualism occurs when the means to legitimately pursue the cultural goals are adhered to despite the fact that the goals are out of reach or abandoned.

> Interactionists assailed the 'mechanistic' structural determinism…Critical sociologists, joining with control theorists argued that Merton employed an oversocialised conception of human nature, replacing Durkheim's biological rebels with passive souls who had to be 'motivated to break the law'. (1989: 455)

Nonetheless, the Mertonian tradition continues to be the leading explanatory framework for understanding the involvement of ethnic minorities in the illicit drug trade. Perhaps this is because, for certain ethnic minority groups across the (western) world, they remain the most residentially concentrated group in areas suffering from multiple socio-economic problems, they have the highest level of unemployment and persistently face exclusion from mainstream society (Akhtar & South, 2000; Bourgois, 2003; Paoli & Reuter, 2008; Seddon, 2006; Viviani, 1996). For example, VanNostrand and Tewksbury's qualitative study of mostly African American drug dealers in a US Midwestern city identifies that for those 'unable to achieve the 'American Dream' through legitimate means' (1999: 63), such 'failures and obstacles pushed [them] to seek alternative, illicit opportunities' (1999: 64). Similarly, Valdez and Kaplan observe that the involvement of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American participants in the drug market of South Texas 'can be interpreted as an adaptive mechanism that is a direct response to the marginal economic status imposed by macro socio-economical background factors' (2007: 894). In their own observation of Turkish and Albanian involvement in Western Europe's drug trade, Paoli and Reuter argue:

> Whether or not one subscribes to anomie or strain theory, it is clear that immigrants' involvement in today's largest illegal market – like other forms of crime in the past – serves as a queer ladder of social mobility. (2008: 23)

There is no denying that broad structural forces play an influential role in driving inequality in the social and economic lives of individuals, which may in turn, mediate their involvement in the drug trade. However, where such macro-level analyses fall short is their failure to sufficiently capture more nuanced, embodied accounts of how structural forces inhere in the lives and practices of those who participate in the drug market. For example, in his critique of Bourgois's ethnographic account, Fitzgerald argues that the crack dealers 'appear to be *produced* by the social environment rather than being part of the structure and *experience* of social life' (2009: 262). For Fitzgerald, it was *how* the crack dealers *felt* when they engaged in the drug economy that

Bourgois's analysis effectively 'shifts away from abstract entities such as risk factors onto more difficult constructs such as affects, meanings and the local physical environment' (2009: 262).

Fitzgerald's (2009) perspective builds on contemporary accounts of the drug problem, which shifts analytical attention away from older, less sophisticated macro structural understandings of drug market participation to more micro-level analyses that articulates the 'specificity of individual contexts' (Duff, 2007: 514). In his ethnographic case study of two drug dealers in rural Victoria, Australia, Fitzgerald maps the experience of drug dealing risk environments by exploring how the drug dealers 'orient themselves in space in relation to a complex amalgam of sensations, memories, inscriptions and intentions' (2009: 261). The analysis of space in this context refers to the drug dealers' domestic homes and according to Fitzgerald, such spaces '[are] not a container in which action occurs' but '[are] made through the interactions of bodies, emotions and physical materials' (2006: 263). Fitzgerald further posits that by drawing on the analytical tool of 'place-making', individuals are afforded the opportunity to make sense of their social worlds. In other words, place-making provides valuable insight into 'the agentic practices of those who are subject to force, how they work with their physical environment, and how larger structural forces become part of their day-to-day practices' (Fitzgerald, 2009: 263).

The notions of 'space' and 'place' – whether social or physical – in the context of risk environments are particularly salient among public health research on drug-related harm associated with drug use (Duff, 2007; Rhodes, 2002; Vitellone, 2010). From a harm minimisation standpoint, Rhodes (2002) argues that by advancing the 'risk environment' to the fore of analysis, researchers and practitioners are encouraged to think about responsibilities for harm in alternative ways that have 'political promise' (2002: 88):

> A harm reduction praxis founded on a risk environment framework illuminates the parallels in how social contexts influence health and vulnerability in general as well as drug-related harms in particular. This inevitably leads to a consideration of non-drug and non-health specific factors in harm reduction, and in turn, points to the importance of what might be described as 'non-health oriented interventions in harm reduction. Shifts in housing policy, for example, may have harm reduction impact, as have a variety of micro-economic, employment and other community development initiatives.

> This is politically important for two reasons. First, it mainstreams drugs and harm reduction as part of wider social movements in public health. This raises the possibilities for broadening the scope for political alliances lobbying for social and environment change. And second, it shifts the locus and politics of change from issues of drug use to wider issues of health vulnerability and human rights. (Rhodes, 2002: 88)

Less well articulated is the theoretical construct of the 'enabling environment' in illicit drugs research. Focusing on the specific space of urban cities, Duff observes that for the most part, harm minimisation accounts tend to present 'bleak visions' of how cities generate or exacerbate risks associated with drug use. In his view, this is a misleading representation as it 'overlooks the array of strengths and opportunities present in urban settings' (2009: 203). Key to his analysis is an understanding of how urban settings support affective and relational processes, especially the ways 'leisure and recreational pass-times serve to bring friends and strangers together in discrete urban spaces in the pursuit of common interests' (2009: 205). By drawing attention to the enabling characteristics of cities, particularly in terms of how they enhance the experience of 'health and wellbeing, resiliency and self-efficacy', Duff argues that social researchers and policy-makers are in a better position to develop effective drug harm reduction policies and interventions that are based on 'natural resources' (2009: 207).

Central to Duff (2009), Fitzgerald (2009) and Rhodes's (2002) work is the unanimous call for illicit drugs researchers to shift the analysis of context from broader structural forces to more detailed accounts of specific local characteristics of individual context. As Duff aptly puts it:

> Where context is defined in relation to a familiar matrix of social, economic and political forces, the *specific local* characteristics of contexts tend to remain obscured. What is lost is the specificity of individual contexts and the various ways local contexts shape local phenomena. Most conventional accounts of context describes a series of structural forces that remain forever 'outside' the contextual field, originating elsewhere and powered by unfamiliar and seemingly incomprehensible historical processes… It is for this reason that one ought to conceive of contexts as an *assemblage* of spaces, modes of embodiment and relations of practice, rather than as a complex or *composite* of these forces. (2007: 507)

In other words, it is the individual's connection to the spaces and places of living that is key to understanding how certain environment conditions give rise to, or reduce drug-related harm (Vitellone, 2010). However, most empirical accounts of space, embodiment and practice as it relates to drug-related harm are concerned with drug *use* rather than drug *dealing* contexts. In Fitzgerald's view, providing less punitive and more therapeutic responses to drug users is relatively easier compared to drug traffickers on 'account that [traffickers] are somewhat different to the 'suffering addict' who can be rehabilitated or redeemed' (2009: 268). It is a far less challenging task to place drug traffickers behind bars and thus, exclude them from the community than to *actually* engage with the complexities surrounding their involvement in the illicit drug trade. Without any sound understanding of how certain forces – whether social, cultural or political – mediate individuals' involvement in the illicit drug trade within specific, local individual contexts, then any attempt by governments, policy-makers and law enforcement to intervene would not only be futile but inevitably have 'unintended and undesirable policy outcomes' (Hughes et al., 2014: 2). To avoid this, it is imperative that drug policy interventions are implemented within the specific risk or enabling environment that give rise to drug trafficking activities. Otherwise, an over-reliance on broad neoliberal 'apparently commonsense assumptions' (Fleetwood, 2011: 375) will frustrate policy and law enforcement efforts to tackle this issue. What's more, by re-directing research and policy attention towards the identification of risk environments at the micro level such as certain localities within urban settings, drug researchers and policymakers have a better vantage point from which to understand how personal and social networks within these specific contexts create opportunity structures to become involved in the illicit drug trade.

2.4.3 Networks and opportunity structures

Scholarship on the process by which individuals or certain groups gain entry into the supply-side of the illicit drug trade have directed attention towards the organisational structure of drug trafficking, as well as situational and environmental conditions that create opportunities for involvement in drug trafficking. Traditionally, 'organised crime' was the dominant orthodoxy through which academics and enforcement circles

approached the analysis of drug trafficking (Dorn et al., 2003). The most expansive definition of organised crime, according to Dorn and colleagues, suggests:

> …there exists a relatively small number of large and enduring criminal enterprises, 'mafias', dominating most opportunities for crime, setting the rules for other, minor players, and penetrating not just the licit economy but also political life. (1998: 538)

Based on the Mafia model, which Reuter describes as 'the most enduring and significant form of organised crime' (1983: 175), the opportunity to infiltrate drug trafficking organisations is considered extremely difficult. This is because such 'traditional forms of organised crime' is heavily dependent upon 'family structures' (Hobbs, 2001: 551), in which 'all transactions take place according to members of a crime family' (Murji, 2007: 786). However, it is now widely agreed by many scholars that this traditional imagery of 'organised crime' is 'out-dated' (Bruinsma & Bernasco, 2004: 79).

In the context of drug trafficking, 'networks' have now become an established way of conceptualising the structure of drug distributions – so much so that Murji observes that 'it appears to be supplanting both markets and hierarchies' (2007: 794). More specifically, rather than being centrally-controlled according to rigid structures, Hobbs emphasises that criminal drug networks are increasingly 'typified by flexibility and unpredictability, operating within multi-layered networks of pecuniary opportunity constituted by both personal criminal networks and specific activity networks' (2001: 555). For example, Reuter and Haaga (1989), in their study of imprisoned drug smugglers in the US, conclude that even at the highest level of drug distribution, there is little evidence to suggest that drug trafficking requires a well-coordinated organisation. Similarly, Decker and Chapman's study of imprisoned high-level drug smugglers (also in the context of the US) identifies that 'drug smuggling efforts are not well-organised' and the drug smuggling organisations described by their respondents 'were more like small cells or networks' which 'are made effective by their dynamic and flexible nature' (2008: 146). Subsequently, the 'loose and fluid forms of interactions' (Murji, 2007: 794) characterised by the network model creates 'fewer barriers and roadblocks' (Decker & Chapman, 2008: 5) for individuals' initiation into, and progression along the drug distribution chain. Nonetheless, a substantial body of research maintains that drug distribution networks remain organised along kinship and ethnic ties (Desroches, 2005;

Pearson & Hobbs, 2001) as they are 'deemed the traditional sources of trust in illegal business enterprises' (Ruggiero & Khan, 2006: 475) as well as 'assuring loyalty by appealing to something other than self-interest' (Hobbs, 2001: 552).

There is a general consensus among scholars that inroads into drug distribution networks are created through the 'pattern of everyday life', which, according to Decker and Chapman, includes 'contact with bonds to blood relatives, affiliational ties with workers or neighbours, or links to persons who can perform reciprocal favours'. They further emphasise that 'it is unlikely for a stranger to be approached on the street and asked to assist in a drug smuggling effort' (2008: 96). In a study of a middle-market drug distribution in the UK, Pearson and Hobbs further reiterate the significance of ethnic and kinship ties in drug distribution networks by likening the criminal networks in their research to 'the traditional family firm', which typically comprise of 'small, tightly bonded groups of individuals with relationships going back a long way – whether in terms of kinship, coming from the same neighbourhood, or growing up at school together' (2001: 27). In another UK example, Dorn and colleagues describe how the 'strength and security' of drug networks are based on trust, emotional bonds and welfare concerns akin to a 'real or adopted family' (1992: 41). In Western Europe, Paoli and Reuter point out that 'strong family and local ties ensure not only the cohesion of the trafficking group but also impermeability to police enquiries' (2008: 25). In Australia, Denton and O'Malley note 'close and long-term kin ties' among women drug dealing networks are 'bound even more tightly together by norms of reciprocity, expectations and personal gain and perceived moral duty to support blood relations' (1999: 519).

Scholars routinely report that the importation level of drug supply is predominantly controlled by ethnically bonded networks based on the twin factors of geographical proximity and family origins in the drug producing countries (for example, Desroches, 2005; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001; Reuter, 2000). Reuter suggests that this is because they have 'better knowledge of potential sellers and opportunities for corruption' (2000: 322) in the drug source countries. Such observations are empirically supported by Desroches's study of high-level drug traffickers in Canada:

> The majority of subjects whose home country is in the Caribbean, South and Central America, or Mexico traffic primarily (or exclusively) in cocaine…Heroin has its origin

> in Southeast Asia and Pacific Rim countries, and offenders with ethnic and family links to this part of the world are more likely to deal in this substance. (2005: 63)

Reuter further contends that ethnic minorities and immigrant groups have 'substantive advantages in the consuming country' based on the observation that 'their communities are likely to provide less co-operation to the police' (2000: 11). Reuter, in a subsequent paper he co-authored with Paoli on drug traffickers in Western Europe, further elaborates that the common link of language and shared cultural characteristics are also considered to be 'major assets' (Paoli & Reuter, 2008: 24) at the practical level based on the fact that:

> …few European police departments are able to conduct effective wire-taps or other electronic surveillances of Albanian dialects. Moreover, even when they are not involved in any illicit activity, ethnic communities are likely to provide less cooperation to the police and tolerate and even hide drug trafficking by their own members…Most immigrant groups are so poorly integrated into their host societies they do not share the moral condemnation of the drug trade…many members of ethnic communities realise that it has become a source of wealth, prestige and respect for some of them. (2008: 24)

Ruggiero and Khan (2006)'s qualitative study on drug supply networks among British South Asian communities identifies divergent evidence on whether networks are organised along ethnic ties. At the local level, some of their informants stated that 'they could only conduct business with their own people' while others emphasised that their distribution networks were becoming increasingly multi-ethnic. Particularly at the mid-upper levels of drug distribution, Ruggiero and Khan observe that South Asian dealers partnered with 'all sorts of people, irrespective of their ethnic background' (2006: 478). As one informant in their study stated, this is because 'competition at middle market level is economic rather than ethnic' (2006: 479). In this context, mono-ethnic networks are limited to small-scale supply and do not have the capacity to expand to large-scale operations, which usually require partnerships with other ethnic networks. In close connection, Murji observes that 'in a world of increasing sources of supply and product destinations, a great many drug transactions are simply that – transactions'; no longer are drug networks in favour of 'ethnic sameness' but rather, they are driven by 'business/commercial imperatives' (Murji, 2007: 796).

Overall, initiation into the world of drug trafficking is only possible if individuals have connections who can introduce them to drug distribution networks. As Desroches aptly puts it, 'a dealer must have access to and recognise opportunity when it presents itself' (2005: 67), and in most cases, such opportunities typically arise during the 'routine activities of everyday life' (Decker & Chapman, 2008: 100). In relation to the notion of shared cultural and ethnic identity as 'as the basis for trust relations' in drug distribution networks, Murji argues that the assumption still 'needs to be demonstrated empirically' (2007: 797). In this respect, 'minority perspectives' (Phillips & Bowling, 2003) provide the best possible vehicle for understanding the function of ethnic ties and cultural frames within drug trafficking networks. Yet, it should not be assumed that 'familial, ethnic [or] cultural' (Murji, 2007: 797) frames operate in the same way for men and women.

2.5 Women in the illicit drug trade

Denton and O'Malley observed in 1999 that 'women are conspicuously absent from most accounts of drug distribution, and where featured, they have been depicted as 'unsuitable' as drug sellers, and as having peripheral, or exploited and subordinate roles in male selling networks' (1999: 513). This is still true. Most recently, Maher and Hudson conducted a metasynthesis of the qualitative literature on women's involvement in the illicit drug trade in an attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of 'the range of female roles and experiences in the drug economy' (2007: 808). However, in comparison to the substantial number of studies that have privileged the perspectives of men, Maher and Hudson identify only 15 qualitative studies that provide 'thick descriptions' (2007: 809) of women's experiences. Based on a review of these 15 studies, Maher and Hudson comment:

> The illicit drug economy is a gender segmented labour market. Within this labour market, while women are resourceful and resilient, they rarely participate above the street level. Results from our qualitative metasynthesis suggest that reasons for this include the gender-stratified and hierarchical nature of the drug economy; the role of men as sponsors, protectors and gatekeepers; the sexualisation of women drug users; and the sexualisation of roles within the drug economy. (2007: 820)

In reviewing the literature, Maher and Hudson (2007) acknowledge that as well as being limited in number, such qualitative studies are also limited in scope. Firstly, the context of investigation is mostly restricted to the 'street-level experiences of drug use and dealing' (2007: 810) in US cities, with very few focusing on mid-upper level women drug traffickers. This echoes Dunlap and colleagues' observation that, 'where women have been the focus of drug studies, they have been examined from the stance of their participation as consumers [and] have rarely been studied as dealers, managers and other roles in the drug economy' (1997: 26). In addition, research tends to focus on 'poor and marginalised women in inner-city drug markets' (Maher & Hudson, 2007: 820). In relation to women's sexualised roles within the illicit drug trade, particularly in the context of providing sex for drugs, Coomber argues that such observations are 'contentious' and 'probably overstated in the research literature'. He further points out that sex transactions 'may indeed be more prevalent in some geographical areas and amongst some groups of women than others' (2006: 52).

In comparison to the heroin markets of the 1960s and 1970s, scholars point out that the expansion of the crack cocaine economy in mostly North American cities during the 1980s and early 1990s paved the way for the movement of women into the illicit drug trade (Evans et al., 2002; Maher & Daly, 1996). At a broader level of analysis, the increase in women's presence during this period has often been interpreted in accordance with the emancipation thesis, which posits:

> As women become liberated from the constraints of traditional gender roles and the confines of the domestic realm they will become more like males in both their legal and illegal behaviour patterns. In the context of crack cultures, one indicator of increasing opportunity resulting from women's emancipation is the nature of the avenue through which they are introduced to drugs. Thus, if women are emancipated, their opportunities to gain access to drugs by their accord, rather than through male negotiated "deals", should increase and they should report patterns of initiation into drug use that are similar to those reported by male drug users. (Evans et al., 2002: 486)

The 'new opportunities' for women to partake in drug distribution have also been attributed to the 'weakening of male dominated networks and market processes' (Maher & Daly, 1996: 468). The notion of a 'crisis of patriarchy' (Bourgois, 2003: 215) is particularly salient in Bourgois's ethnography of (mostly men) crack user-dealers in El

Barrio. In keeping with his political economic perspective of the crack cocaine epidemic in urban US settings, Bourgois stresses the importance of understanding how structural transformations in economic relations give rise to gendered experiences of social suffering more generally and in the drug economy in particular. According to Bourgois:

> Greater female involvement in crack reflects in a rather straightforward manner the growing emancipation of women throughout all aspects of inner city life, culture and economy. Women – especially the emerging generation which is most at risk for crack addiction – are no longer obliged to stay at home and maintain the family as they were a generation ago. They no longer readily sacrifice public life or forgo independent opportunities to generate personally disposable income… To a certain extent, the emancipation of women has taken place at a faster rate on inner city streets than it has in middle-class suburbs. (1989: 643-4)

Bourgois further argues that this has consequently resulted in a 'crisis of patriarchy' which 'expresses itself concretely in the polarisation of domestic violence and sexual abuse' (1996: 424). In her critique of Bourgois's 'gendered vision of the social world', Vitellone (2004) calls into question his assumptions that the interpersonal violence experienced by women is produced by a 'male crisis' that is fuelled by 'a mismatch between a masculine habitus and an increasing feminised public sphere' (1994: 131). Specifically, Vitellone argues that 'Bourgois unproblematically accepts and reproduces the assumption that drug use is simply structured by, or is the outcome of, socio-structural transformations' (2004: 145).

Maher (1997), in her ethnographic study on 'active crack users' Brooklyn, New York, also takes issue with Bourgois's (2003) theoretical account of women in the crack economy. Firstly, Maher observes that his macro structural analysis 'fails to elaborate the nature of women's participation *in* the drug economy and the ways in which their gendered status structures this participation' (1997: 13). Secondly, Bourgois's account that 'economically marginal males [in the drug trade] reconstruct their notions of masculine dignity around interpersonal violence, economic parasitism and sexual domination' (Bourgois, 1996: 414) assumes, in Maher's words:

> [T]he backlash against feminism has filtered through to the street-level drug culture where it gains expression in violence against women… The validity of this argument is ultimately contingent on the degree to which one accepts that women crack users have

> challenged traditional gender roles and that patriarchal gender relations have been undermined as a result. (1997: 14)

By resituating her analysis to the everyday interactions and exchanges of women drug users, Maher demonstrates how class, race and gender relations are threaded into the drug experience rather than existing outside of it. In her account of the nature of women's participation in the drug economy, Maher – in an earlier paper she co-authored with Daly, observes that women remain 'confined to a harsh economic periphery' (1996: 486) in which institutionalised sexism 'inhibited the women's access to participate as high-level distributors' (1996: 484). Based on these findings, Maher and Daly conclude: 'To the extent that "new opportunities" in drug distribution and sales were realised in Bushwick and the wider Brooklyn sample, they were realised by men' (1996: 486).

More recently, a growing body of research has sought to provide an alternative reading of women's involvement in the illicit drug trade, one that deviates 'from the leading pathology and powerlessness narrative' (Anderson, 2005: 372) and instead, focuses on how women exercise individual agency in what is typically considered to be 'essentially a male occupation' (Denton & O'Malley, 1999: 513). Denton and O'Malley – in their ethnographic study of a group of women drug dealers in Melbourne, Australia – demonstrate how women can be successful in running their own 'drug dealerships'. For example, one informant 'operated in the upper echelons of the drug market', and as a wholesaler, 'sold over three million dollars worth of heroin in eight weeks' while another informant worked as a 'middle-level seller' and 'made between eight and ten thousand dollars per week' (1999: 516). Denton and O'Malley identify that for women who operated at the mid-upper levels of drug distribution, much of their success was attributed to the kin relationships that made up the 'innermost core' of their drug dealing business. More specifically, Denton and O'Malley report:

> For the most sensitive aspects of their enterprises, the women relied upon familial or quasi-familial relations, and the skills associated with the maintenance and reproduction of these – most especially with those aspects of work where relations of trust are most vital. (1999: 528)

Subsequently, women's resort to ruthlessness and violence was uncommon, although still 'well within their repertoires of action' (Denton & O'Malley, 1999: 513). That said,

Murji observes that ‘trust’ and ‘kin ties’ are ‘also found to be a resource in male dealing worlds’ (2007: 798). In a critique of Denton’s account of the lives of the Melbourne women drug dealers discussed above, Zajdow observes that, ‘in her effort to present women as active agents of their own destinies (as writers often present men in the drug culture) […] Denton understates the structural positions in which many women, as women, find themselves’ (2001: 1). Moreover, Zajdow argues:

> I do not believe that there are two distinct types of feminism – one where all women are victims of an overarching patriarchy with no individual agency, or the one where the sisters assert themselves in discourse and everything else takes care of itself. These distinctions are meaningless in the lived world. (2001: 2)

However, as Maher points out, it is this binary conceptualisation of women as either ‘passive victims of oppressive social structures’ or ‘rational, volitional agents’ (1997: 1) that has largely informed the academic literature on women’s presence in the illicit drug trade. This dichotomised view, in Maher’s words, ultimately ‘ignore[s] the relationships between broader social, economic and cultural formations and immediate, specific and local contexts in structuring the conditions by which women’s agency is enacted’ (1997: 1). For example, while most of the women crack cocaine users in Maher’s study were sex workers and had ‘chosen’ to be, Maher reports that, ‘they have not done so under conditions of their own choosing’ and their choices were thus ‘shaped by a collective consciousness in which gendered and race meanings of ‘crime as work’ form an integral part of the habitus of street-level drug users’ (1997: 193).

In the same vein as Maher (1997), Anderson demonstrates how women’s experiences in the contemporary illicit drug world are characterised by a multitude of complexities and nuances and therefore, are ‘not quite as simple as it has been made out to be’ (2005: 375). Rather than pigeonholing women’s experiences as either victimised or volitional, Anderson stresses that drug trafficking is a vehicle of both ‘victimisation’ and ‘empowerment’ (2005: 375). She also departs from most other scholarship on women’s involvement in the drug trade by illustrating how ‘supporting roles’ traditionally performed by women are ‘fundamental to the social and economic organisation of the illicit drug world and earn them various forms of capital that can aid future conventional pursuits’ (2005: 393-4). Such ‘supporting roles’ include the provision of housing and sustenance, buying drugs, subsidising men’s dependency and participation in selling

drugs. In this context, Anderson asserts that 'women are not only powerful actors in the drug world, but that their work is central to the drug economy' (2005: 371). It is important to bear in mind that Anderson's observation is based on accounts of women's experiences within the context of inner-city, street-level drug markets in the US, and thus, she acknowledges that 'observations to be made about gender, power, agency and capital may be limited to the extent that this type of market differs dramatically from others' (2005: 375).

Outside the realm of street-level drug markets, Campbell's (2008) recent study of female drug smugglers along the US-Mexican border describes four diverse levels of participation: 'female drug lords' at the top; middle-level women who 'may manipulate gender stereotypes to their advantage', 'low-level mules', where women's involvement is concentrated; and women who are not active in the business but are necessarily affected by the involvement of their menfolk (Campbell, 2008: 233). Campbell points out that women who operated at the highest levels of the drug trade experienced a greater degree of agency and power, and 'unprecedented freedoms from dependence on males' (2008: 259) while women at the bottom rungs of the drug distribution chain 'are usually victimised the most' (2008: 260). Campbell further contends that such experiences vary according to race/ethnicity, class and age. However, Maher and Hudson observe that 'little is known about how gender and ethnicity interact to shape opportunities for both men and women within particular drug markets and the broader drug economy' (2007: 820). In saying that, an issue that has recently grasped the attention of scholars, and one that has courted an inordinate amount of media attention in recent years, is the growing phenomenon of imprisoned ethnic minority (and foreign national) women for drug-related crime in prisons across the western world.

Joseph describes the recent global increase of imprisoned women as 'astronomical' (2006: 140) while Sudbury defines it as an 'explosion' (2005: 167). In spite of this, both researchers point out that very little academic resources have been directed towards investigating the reasons behind the sharp increase in women incarcerated for drug crimes. Such observations are in keeping with the already limited knowledge base on women's involvement in the illicit drug trade. Commenting specifically on the UK context, Joseph asserts that, 'similar to the United States, the war on drugs has become a war on women in England and Wales' (2006: 145). She suggests that a core reason for

the rise in imprisoned rates among women ‘appear to be changes in [drug trafficking] sentencing policy and law enforcement priorities rather than a change in the amount of severity of crime in which women are involved’ (2006: 141). However, as argued earlier, the overrepresentation of women in the criminal justice system, or any group for that matter, should not be overlooked as simply a reflection of law enforcement bias. The overrepresentation of any group in the prison system should warrant further empirical investigation as it signifies that there are more serious issues at hand.

Harper and colleagues observe that because women tend to ‘occupy the high-risk, low-status role of courier’ (2002: 101), particular academic and policy attention has been directed towards this specific population. A central debate that has emerged across many western countries – particularly in the US, UK and Europe –concerns the punitive sanctions that are applied to drug couriers, which Joseph describes as ‘remorseless’ (2006: 141). Almost two decades ago, Tracy Huling, who focused on the effect of draconian drug sentencing policies on women drug couriers in the US reported:

> Despite drug couriers being a key target of drug enforcement efforts and subject to harsh sentencing policies across the globe, only limited information on them is available. What is known, however, suggests that women drug couriers should be a population of particular concern to policy experts examining the effects of the global war on drugs. (1995: 15)

Fast forward two decades and still, not much can be ascertained about this group of women other than that they ‘come from the most marginal and vulnerable parts of the globe and are disproportionately female and from ethnic minorities’ (Fleetwood, 2011: 389). In England and Wales, Fleetwood points out that there is a renewed focus by the Sentencing Advisory Panel to revise a set of sentencing guidelines, with particular emphasis on sentences handed down to drug mules based on the assessment that current sentences are ‘disproportionate to the culpability of the individual offender’ (2011: 375). In spite of these proposed new changes, Fleetwood argues that ‘both existing and proposed sentencing guidelines for drug offenders in England and Wales are not based on research evidence but rather employ neo liberal assumptions about crime and control’ (2011: 376). By narrowly basing sentences on the price and weight of the drugs imported, Fleetwood states that ‘the rhetoric of punishment has been replaced by the

rhetoric of rationality' (2011: 376). As a consequence, the proposed sentencing guidelines continue to 'punish vulnerable groups disproportionately' (2011: 389).

Echoing the pattern of the women prison population across the western world, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) reports that the number of women in Australia's prisons increased by 8 per cent between 30 June 2011 and 30 June 2012, compared to only a 0.4 per cent increase in the men's prison population over the same period. In the state of Victoria, the annual *Statistical Profile of Victorian Prison System* report identifies that while the largest proportional increase in male receptions has occurred in offences against the person, which increased by 23.8 per cent between 2006-07 and 2010-11, the most significant change among the women prison population has been the receptions for drug offences, which increased by 50 per cent over the same five year period. Alongside the dramatic rise in Victorian women incarcerated for drug offences is the significant growth of Việt Nam-born women prisoners who are incarcerated for the importation, cultivation or distribution of illicit drugs. Based on the Victorian prison data, the number of Việt Nam-born female prisoners increased from 29 to 55 (from 5.8 per cent to 9.8 per cent of receptions) between 2006-07 and 2010-11 (Department of Justice Victoria, 2011). Moreover, of all the female prisoners born outside Australia, Việt Nam-born women prisoners make up the largest group, representing 15.6 per cent of the female prisoner population. Although such trends have elicited considerable media attention, complete with anecdotal evidence from Vietnamese community leaders and law enforcement officers as to why this is occurring, the academic domain has yet to produce any insightful empirical data, or at the very least, commented on this recent social phenomenon.

Taking into account the key arguments raised in this chapter, this study aims to contribute some much-needed knowledge on drug traffickers – specifically, ethnic minority women drug traffickers – by exploring the specific population of Vietnamese women incarcerated for their roles in the distribution of illicit drugs in Victoria, Australia. In particular, this thesis sets out to investigate the pathways that led the women into the illicit drug trade, the networks and opportunities that facilitated their initiation as well as their experiences of working in the drug trade. But first, in order to fully appreciate the nuances and complexities associated with Vietnamese women's

involvement in Australia's illicit drug trade, it is imperative that we locate the women within the broader context of Vietnamese lives in Australia.

CHAPTER THREE
Vietnamese lives in Australia

Since the mid-1990s, the Vietnamese population has been consistently placed under the political, public and academic spotlight in relation to their involvement in Australia's drug problem – particularly in the use and distribution of heroin (Higgs et al., 1999). Moreover, Reid and colleagues identify that the Vietnamese in Australia are 'rapidly becoming very well researched with regard to illicit drug issues' (Reid et al., 2001: 360). The problem is that much of what is known about Vietnamese involvement in the Australian illicit drug trade is skewed towards an understanding of street-based heroin users in open retail drug markets – a trend that is echoed in illicit drugs research worldwide. Where other levels of drug supply are concerned, there is very little empirical knowledge from which meaningful conclusions can be drawn. This thesis seeks to redress this empirical gap. It does so by first situating the analysis within the broader context of Vietnamese lives in Australia. As Bourgois (2003) points out, the lives of drug traffickers cannot be understood in a historical and sociocultural vacuum. This chapter thus begins with a historical overview of the circumstances surrounding the arrival and settlement of Vietnamese people in Australia followed by a description of their contemporary social, cultural and economic worlds. It then concludes with a review and critique of the extant (or lack thereof) academic research on Vietnamese involvement in the illicit drug trade as drug traffickers, with a particular emphasis on the rising trend of Vietnamese women engaging in the importation, cultivation and distribution of illicit drugs in Melbourne, Australia.

3.1 The Vietnamese diaspora

The fall of Sài Gòn in April 1975 saw 'the largest exodus of Vietnamese nationals in history' (Coughlan, 1998: 175). It is estimated that between two and three million Vietnamese men, women and children fled their homeland as boat people [*thuyền nhân*]. In the decades that followed, the number of Vietnamese people living outside of Việt Nam has steadily increased. In 2011, there were more than 185 000 Vietnamese-born people living in Australia, making it one of the largest Vietnamese-diaspora [*Việt Kiều*]

communities in the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Outside Southeast Asia, only the US (1 600 000) and France (250 000) have larger communities (Ben-Moshe & Pyke, 2012: 19). Given that Census data does not include Australian-born children and grandchildren of early Vietnamese arrivals, Ben-Moshe and Pyke highlight that the 'actual size of the Vietnamese community is considerably larger than the Census would suggest' (2012: 19).

The Vietnamese diaspora is generally divided into four distinct categories. The first consists of people who left Việt Nam prior to 1975, with most migrating to neighbouring countries including Cambodia, China, Laos as well as a small number who migrated to France during the period of French colonisation. The second category of the overseas Vietnamese population is made up of refugees who fled the country following the unification of Việt Nam under communist rule in 1975. The third category includes those who worked and studied in the former communist countries and remained there following the Soviet collapse in the late 1980s. The most recent category are economic migrants that include those who have undertaken study in either the US, Canada, Australia and the UK and have stayed on in those countries to work and live as permanent residents (Ben-Moshe & Pyke, 2012; Nožina, 2010).

The migration of Vietnamese people to the West, in Carruther's words, 'was not a gradual process but an explosion' (Carruthers, 2001: 33) arising from the political events following the aftermath of the Việt Nam War. Given that the majority of the overseas Vietnamese population left their homeland under circumstances of 'forced migration' (Carruthers, 2001: 34), Carruthers points out that the literature has tended to represent the Vietnamese diaspora through the 'grand narrative' of a 'victim diaspora' (2001: 33). As with other groupings, it is important to acknowledge that the Vietnamese diaspora do not represent a homogeneous group, but are characterised by much diversity in terms of religion, class, status, lifestyle and economic and social groups (Rodd & Leber, 1997; Thomas, 1999). However, this thesis is premised on the conviction that if governments, policy-makers, community-based organisations, service providers and researchers are to adequately address the growing issue of Vietnamese women's involvement in the illicit drug trade, then it is imperative that we articulate their shared experiences.

3.2 Fleeing the homeland

The nature of the escape journey, according to Coupland, is best described as ‘traumatic and drawn out’ (2008: 85). It is estimated that approximately 200 000 people died at sea between 1977 and 1980. Many people drowned because their small, rickety boats could not withstand the rough seawaters. Others died at the hand of pirates, who ‘robbed, raped, assaulted and killed its passengers’ (Abueg & Chun, 1996: 286) while some helplessly witnessed their death. For those who sought asylum in the countries of Southeast and East Asia, personal accounts of the refugee experience reveal that surviving the perilous boat journey was just one of many hardships endured during the long migration process. The refugee camps were mostly overcrowded, and the unsanitary living conditions often led to illnesses such as hepatitis, malaria, gastroenteritis and tuberculosis (Ho, 2006). Compounding these dire circumstances was the psychological stress associated with the lengthy process of waiting to be accepted by resettlement countries. For many refugees, the uncertainty of their fate left them feeling in a state of ‘limbo’ (Knudsen, 1983: 170). As one participant in Knudsen’s study explained, ‘that is the worst thing of living here; you never know a thing’ (1983: 73).

With thousands of Vietnamese refugees placing their fate in the hands of resettlement countries, Australia – particularly during the period from 1975 to early 1978 – was reluctant to make any substantial commitment to the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees (Jakubowicz, 2004; Thomas, 1999; Viviani, 1996). Australia had just abolished its White Australia policy two years prior to the exodus of the first group of Vietnamese refugees and as such, Australian sentiment was, at best, ambivalent towards an influx of Asian migrants. However, international pressure mounted on Australia to accept a ‘fair share’ (Mellor, 2004: 635) of refugees and to ‘ease the burden of housing and feeding Indochinese refugees that had fallen on its northern neighbours’ (Thomas, 1999: 12). Through much political debate, Australia eventually settled a total of 57 770 Vietnamese refugees over the period from 1975 to the end of 1982 (Viviani, 1996: 10). This period marked the beginning of the ‘Australian chapter of the Vietnamese diaspora’ (Carruthers, 2008: 102).

3.3 Vietnamese arrival in Australia

Scholars have pointed out that it was 'almost an accident in history' (Jakubowicz, 2004: 4) that the political events of 1975 coincided with 'the liberation of Australia's immigration policy towards Asian-born people' (Thomas, 1999: 12). Nancy Viviani – a prominent academic on the entry and settlement experiences of the Vietnamese in Australia – perfectly captures the tone of the Australian sentiment towards Vietnamese settlement:

> This was the first time we had settled a group of people in whom the characteristics of race and politics combined to distinguish them from other migrants and refugees… Refugee landing on our shores had a far-reaching and complex impact on many Australians' deeply held perceptions of the vulnerability of their country to Asian penetration. (1984: 235)

Viviani further notes that the mass migration of Vietnamese to Australia 'formed the first and most difficult test case of the outcomes of the abolition of [the White Australia] policy' (1996: 1). Prior to 1975, Australia was home to a very small population of Vietnamese people. According to Coughlan, the first group arrived in Australia in August 1920 and consisted of 38 Vietnamese 'coolie labourers' (1998: 177) who were *en route* to New Caledonia. However, their ship had been blown off-course during a storm and they subsequently sought refuge in Townsville, in far north Queensland. Coughlan notes that in the following four decades, a handful of Vietnamese came to Australia as immigrants or students. The establishment of the Colombo Plan in the 1950s – an aid program designed to give a university education to people from developing countries – paved the way for Vietnamese students to attend Australian tertiary institutions. By early 1975, there were approximately 1300 Vietnamese people in Australia. This population included: about 540 orphans who had been adopted into Vietnamese families; approximately 470 tertiary students; 41 members of diplomatic families; and the remaining 250 consisted of Vietnamese women who had married Australian men, former students who remained in Australia after completing their studies and Vietnamese visitors who had been caught in Australia at the time of the fall of Sài Gòn (Coughlan, 1998: 177).

Today, the Vietnamese represent the sixth largest migrant community in Australia. While there have been 'several roads' (Coughlan, 1992: 75) for Vietnamese entry into Australia, the highest proportion arrived as refugees and according to Viviani (1996), they migrated to Australia in four broad waves: from 1975 to early 1976, from early 1976 to 1978, from 1978 to 1989 and from 1989 to 1991. The first wave (1975-1976) of Vietnamese refugee migrants consisted mostly of ethnic Vietnamese from well-educated and professional classes of Việt Nam including military and government elites (Abueg & Chun, 1996). This initial wave mostly arrived in Australia with their family in tact (Gold, 1992) and due to their educational and professional background, members of this group 'formed and continue to form the nucleus of the leadership in the Vietnamese community in Australia' (Viviani, 1996: 103). The second wave (1976-1978) was a 'trickle' (Viviani, 1996: 103) in the sense that the number of arrivals was relatively low – largely due to Australia's restrictive entry policy at the time. This group included people who were caught in refugee camps from the first wave as well as individuals who were among the first to experience the political and economic strain under the new Communist regime.

The third and fourth waves (1978-1991) of refugees formed the highest peak of arrivals from Việt Nam, and comprised of a broader cross-section of the population from peasants, fishermen and the unemployed to members of the petite bourgeoisie and middle and upper classes (Carruthers, 2001; Viviani, 1996). The political event that precipitated the first part of the third wave of mostly ethnic Chinese was the takeover of private businesses by the new Communist government in March 1978. The second part of the third wave of refugees was initiated by the outbreak of war, first between Việt Nam and Cambodia in late 1978 and later following China's invasion of Northern Việt Nam in February 1979. The fourth wave mostly consisted of a 'backlog of people from camps and on family reunion under the Orderly Departure Program from Vietnam' (Viviani, 1996: 103).

Of the 57 770 Vietnamese refugees who had settled in Australia by the end of 1982, half had arrived without their spouses (Burley, 1990: 201). Among the youth, Viviani reports that 'over two thousand were unattached minors, mainly boys, who were sent from Việt Nam by boat' (1996: 125). Rodd and Leber point out that the experience of migrating to a new country with no direct parent or close family had led to specific

issues of ‘homelessness, isolation, poverty and depression’ (1997: 19). Furthermore, Mellor reports that ‘not all refugees from a particular family constellation were accepted into Australia’ and some ‘ended up dispersed across more than two countries’ (2004: 635). This experience of separation and loss of family members during the long migration process left many Vietnamese people ‘extremely vulnerable’ (Ho, 2006: 97) by the time they reached Australian shores. In the late 1980s, the Australian government established a bi-lateral agreement with the Vietnamese government to implement a more orderly family reunion program. This enabled Vietnamese refugees with Australian residence of at least two years to sponsor the immigration of their parents and siblings (Thomas & Balnaves, 1993). By the early 1990s, Australia’s Vietnamese population was largely made up of Vietnamese refugees and family reunion migrants (Coughlan, 1998; Viviani, 1996).

Today, Vietnamese migration to Australia, as Carruthers (2008) notes, has entered a post-refugee phase. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Vietnamese population in Australia is no longer exclusively made up of refugees and their families but also includes Vietnamese nationals arriving in Australia as migrant workers, students or tourist visitors. In 2010-11, there were 4709 settler arrivals, with more than two thirds entering as a partner of an Australian resident. In the same period, temporary entry visas were granted to 7131 students, 240 migrant workers and 23 906 visitors (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011). It should be noted that despite the recent influx of new Vietnamese immigrants and sojourners to Australia, there is very little detailed data about them which this thesis can draw on to offer some insight into their experiences of living in Australia. Therefore, much of the literature discussed in this chapter reflects the experiences of the earlier arrivals of Vietnamese refugee migrants and their families.

3.4 The social, economic and cultural lives of the Vietnamese in Australia

Of all the Asian immigrants in Australia, Thomas (1999) contends that it is the Vietnamese who have continuously maintained a strong profile in the broader Australian community. Jakubowicz adds that such high levels of attention are ‘not necessarily at their behest’ (2004: 2). Most of what is written about Vietnamese lives in

Australia is not positioned from the perspectives of the Vietnamese themselves. This is most evident each time discussion turns to what is typically considered to be defining features of Vietnamese lives in Australia – high spatial concentration and high unemployment as well as Vietnamese involvement in casino gambling and the illicit drug trade.

3.4.1 High spatial concentration

The pattern of Vietnamese concentration in certain residential and commercial spaces across Australia's largest cities ignited xenophobic fears among the Australian public of an 'Asianisation of Australia' (Coughlan, 2008: 161) – particularly in the years immediately following their arrival. Such patterns were taken to be visible signs that the Vietnamese could not, and would not, integrate into Australian society, and for those who openly opposed their presence, it 'became a source of much fear mongering' (Carruthers, 2008: 104). For example, Geoffrey Blainey makes clear his views on Asian immigration in stating that their settlement 'posed a threat to the Australian identity, culture, values, and the supposed plight of 'ordinary' Australians' (Blainey cited in Mellor, 2008: 633). On the issue of high Vietnamese spatial concentration, he argues that such clustering has transformed Australian suburbs into a 'tribal battleground' (Geoffrey Blainey, *Weekend Australian*, 12-13 March 1988). The notion of 'Asian ghettos' (Birrell, 1993) is another negative image presented to the Australian public in order to tap into the populist fear of 'all that can go wrong with migrant settlement and integration' (Viviani, 1996: 39). That said, Viviani points out that such 'fears are neither foolish nor unfounded' (1996: 39). She observes that:

> Australians are taught the history of the goldfield riots against the Chinese last century, they are well aware of the problems of the black ghettos in the USA, they have the sickening sight of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and the inter-ethnic-massacres of Rwanda on their TV screens every night…This is precisely why Blainey's message has struck home in the public debate on Indochinese. The group most clearly different from Anglo-Australians in Australia alongside the Aborigines, is the Indochinese: different in appearance and clustered together in apparently separate areas in large numbers, leading lives apparently quite different to those of other Australians. (1996: 39-40)

Moving away from culture-bound analyses, Coughlan raises the question of 'whether individuals choose to live in ethnic enclaves, or whether they are forced into segregated ethnic enclaves by discriminatory structural factors' (2008: 178). Basing his analysis on the 2006 Census data, Coughlan found 'an increasing dispersion' (2008: 161) of Vietnamese into mainstream communities. This is a pattern that is most common among Vietnamese families who have become established and achieved a certain level of socioeconomic success. Alongside trends of spatial mobility are statistics that reveal a high proportion of Vietnamese migrants still residing in 'traditionally Vietnamese areas' (Thomas, 1999: 111). The 2006 Census reveals that the majority of the Vietnamese population live in the state of New South Wales (NSW) (40 per cent) followed by Victoria (36.8 per cent). In NSW, the local government area (LGA) of Fairfield continues to have a high concentration of Vietnamese residents (39 per cent). In Victoria, the Vietnamese remain distinctively concentrated in the LGAs of Brimbank (25.7 per cent), Greater Dandenong (18 per cent) and Maribyrnong (10.4 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

The clustering of Vietnamese migrants in certain locales around Australian cities is certainly not unique, with similar patterns found among southern European immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s (Grimes, 1993). One of the positive aspects of ethnic clustering, according to Coughlan, is that it 'assists the new immigrants in their transition into their new environment' (2008: 163) – particularly when the social, cultural and economic landscape of the new environment is worlds apart from the original homeland. Mazumdar and colleagues further point out that 'ethnic enclaves play a significant role in the immigrants' experience by mitigating the psychological trauma of displacement, providing alterative economic structures, and facilitating the preservation of cultural traditions' (2000: 319). The LGAs mentioned above are predominantly traditional working-class suburbs and have hosted newly arrived migrants to Australia. Many manufacturing jobs have been established within and around these areas, as well as cheap and affordable housing and convenient transportation services (Viviani, 1996). Such features are recognised as being highly influential in attracting Vietnamese migrants to these areas.

Thomas (1999), in her ethnographic study of Vietnamese lives in Australia, identifies a deeper cultural theme, one that is rooted in feelings of loss and separation associated

with the process of displacement, in explaining why many Vietnamese migrants choose to live in areas of high Vietnamese concentration:

> The wish of many Vietnamese to hear their language, buy food they are familiar with and be near friends and family, combined with their fear of impersonality, has led to the transformation of many public spaces and suburbs… A clustering of Vietnamese people in certain locations in Australian cities has been a necessary experience for many families dealing with the loss of their homeland. Many Vietnamese people cannot afford telephones or cars when they first arrive in Australia, and this increases the necessity to have direct engagement with other people. (1999: 109)

The development of Vietnamese economic and commercial hubs in specific localities is a prime example of how the Vietnamese have sought to 'reclaim their heritage' and 're-establish their roots' (Mazumdar et al., 2000: 322) within the context of the Australian urban landscape. The suburbs of Cabramatta and Footscray in Sydney and Melbourne respectively are arguably the most recognised, and widely referenced Vietnamese commercial hubs in Australia. The CBD of both suburbs are replete with Vietnamese restaurants, bakeries and foods stalls as well as Vietnamese-run professional services including medical, dental, legal and financial. The storefronts of most businesses are adorned with decorative Vietnamese signage in 'an attempt to recreate the feel of an Asian marketplace' (Thomas, 1999: 109). Apart from the obvious function of commercial exchange, Thomas notes:

> The creation of distinctive public spaces has allowed the Vietnamese minority to counter alienation and to resist political and economic domination from the majority, at the same time as creating a site in which notions of an authentic Vietnamese identity are challenged and re-created. (1999: 87)

In the eyes of the Australian public, such sites have generally produced two conflicting perceptions where on the one hand, they are regarded as a positive symbol of multiculturalism while on the other, these sites are pinpointed as the breeding ground for criminality. Regardless of where one stands on the issue of Vietnamese spatial concentration, a key feature that cannot be ignored is the persistently high levels of unemployment associated with areas of high Vietnamese concentration. Returning to Coughlan's earlier question, perhaps it is the case that for many Vietnamese families, they are forced to or unable to disperse from such 'ethnic enclaves' due to

‘discriminatory structural factors’ (2008: 178). As Viviani contends, ‘an enduring truth about living in Australia’ rests on the notion that ‘where you live depends on how much you earn’ (1996: 56).

3.4.2 High unemployment rates

It has been almost 40 years since the Vietnamese first arrived and settled in Australia, but they persistently present the highest levels of unemployment rates compared to any other Australians. The latest 2011 Census statistic reveals that the unemployment rate among the Việt Nam-born population was 9.9 per cent compared to 5.6 per cent among the Australian-born population. In terms of (declared) income earnings, the 2011 Census reveals that the median individual weekly income for Việt Nam-born Australians was $390 compared to $597 for all Australian-born (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011).

Vietnamese migrants’ high unemployment rates are predominantly attributed to their poor English proficiency and lack of suitable job skills necessary for labour market participation in Australia. Although such factors have acted as major barriers to Vietnamese migrants’ employment opportunities, it should not be assumed that the causes of such factors are ‘located in the characteristics of the Vietnamese population’ (Dwyer, 2009: 61). A different picture emerges when the (un)employment patterns of the Vietnamese are set within the bigger picture of Australia’s political economic and social system.

The distinctively high unemployment rates among the Vietnamese population in the 1980s through to the 1990s are often explained in relation to the following key political economic events: first, the two deepest economic recessions (1980-1981 and 1990-1992) that Australia had experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930s; and second, the structural changes to the Australian labour market in the 1980s, which resulted in a major shift from traditional unskilled and semi-skilled factory jobs to services and trade industries (Viviani, 1996). Although this decade of economic turmoil saw the rate of unemployment rise across all segments of the Australian labour force, the employment opportunities were particularly limited for the Vietnamese due to their newly arrived status, which according to Viviani, ‘is likely the most powerful factor in

Vietnamese unemployment' (1996: 75). Compounding the situation was the fact that most Vietnamese migrants had arrived in Australia with limited English proficiency and a lack of 'readily transferable skills' (Lack & Templeton, 1995: 159). The most available and accessible jobs were subsequently found in 'low-skilled, unregulated and non-unionised areas of the workforce' such as the 'clothing, textile, footwear, catering and retail trades' (Lack & Templeton, 1995: 159). Adding further strain to the trajectory of Vietnamese employment was the restructuring of the Australian economy, which consequently led to a 'substantial contraction' (Coughlan, 1998: 176) in traditional unskilled and semi-skilled factory jobs – the economic base of many Vietnamese families. Viviani further notes that during this period, the government had reduced funding to its English training classes and introduced a user-pay system which 'added to the disadvantage' of newly arrived Vietnamese migrants who 'need[ed] English most' (1996: 80). In the US, Bui notes that Vietnamese women in particular did not have the opportunity to study English because 'they had to work to support their families and to help other relatives in their home country or because they had to stay at home to take care of small children and do housework' (2003: 225).

The considerable socioeconomic disadvantages faced by many Vietnamese migrants in the early phase of their settlement in Australia should not be interpreted as static and unchanging. McAllister, for example, observes that 'the Vietnamese display the fastest growth in economic achievement of any newly arrived immigrant group' (1995: 458). For certain subsectors of the Vietnamese population, there is also increasing evidence of upward mobility on academic measures. For example, the rate of participation in degree and higher education among the Vietnamese population is slightly higher than the Australian average. Home ownership rates of the Việt Nam-born are also relatively high given their short period of residence (Ben-Moshe & Pyke, 2012). In Victoria alone, the 2006 Census reveals that 73.8 per cent of Việt Nam-born people either owned or were purchasing homes in comparison to 69.9 per cent of the overall Victorian population (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2007). Despite there being 'significant social differentiation' within the Vietnamese-Australian population in terms of 'social mobility and an increase in levels of education and occupation' (Thomas, 2002: 12), what is of particular concern is the broader picture of Census data that indicates

persisting high levels of unemployment for a large proportion of the Vietnamese in Australia.

Under changing economic circumstances marked by mass job losses, combined with the double burden of having to financially support families in both Australia and Việt Nam, what is characteristic of the Vietnamese migrant population is their movement from the mainstream economy to the 'Vietnamese ethnic enclave economy' (Coughlan, 1998: 187), particularly in the informal sector. Viviani first raised the question of whether official unemployment rates of the Vietnamese are 'real' given that 'there is strong evidence that a proportion of Vietnamese are on unemployment benefits while they are in paid work' (1996: 84). As suggested by the extensive international literature on the work patterns of ethnic minority and immigrant groups, when faced with the experience of 'blocked mobility' (Gold & Kibria, 1993) in the mainstream labour market, ethnic economic enclaves provide an important source of jobs and opportunities (Kibria, 1994). As Portes and Haller point out:

> Ethnic economies permit immigrants and ethnic minorities to reduce disadvantages and exclusion, negotiating the terms of their participation in the general labour market from a position of greater strength. Unable to find work that the general labour market offers, or just reluctant to mix with foreigners, immigrants and ethnic minorities have the option of employment or self-employment in the ethnic economy of their group. (2005: 650)

In this respect, 'ethnic economies soak up the unemployment the mainstream leaves' (Light, 2005: 655) and according to Thomas, it is in this context 'where informal economies thrive' (1999: 110).

To fully understand the social and economic worlds of Vietnamese migrants in Australia, research priority should also be directed towards an investigation into the significance of the informal economy in Vietnamese lives. To date, research analyses on the employment patterns of Vietnamese-Australians have largely been restricted to the mainstream formal economy. Consequently, such analyses have generally produced findings that narrowly conceptualise the Vietnamese as victims of a discriminatory economic system. Less well articulated are accounts of how the Vietnamese actively regain control over their economic lives in the informal sector of ethnic economies. Current knowledge on Vietnamese participation in the informal economy is mostly

drawn from studies investigating the role of Vietnamese women outworkers in the garment industry, which is generally described as ‘illegal home workshops’ (Jakubowicz, 2004: 10). Exploitative wages and poor, unhealthy working conditions are the dominant features that define the nature of the garment industry, and according to Viviani, ‘it is the ugly face of ethnic business’ (1996: 92). However, despite ‘literally sacrificing themselves in the work [and] suffering repetition and other injuries’ (Jakubowicz, 2004: 10), working in the garment industry was one of very few available options for Vietnamese families to make a living and to support their children through high school and university education.

Aside from providing employment opportunities, the informal sector of ethnic economies is also a crucial source of loans for ethnic minority and immigrant groups who are unable to obtain conventional finance (Kibria, 1994). According to Light:

> Although banks deliver service effectively to the mainstream, they have long failed to deliver savings and credit outside the mainstream. Banks neglect and have always neglected low-income customers, small business owners, inner cities, slums, immigrants and non-whites. (2005: 657)

In this context, ethnic minority and immigrant groups turn to rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) – the generic name for a type of informal lending and credit system, which is most common in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa but also used by immigrant groups in developed countries (Besley et al., 1993). Members of ROSCA, usually families and friends and numbering from 4 to 30, meet weekly or monthly to make a contribution to a common fund (Portes & Haller, 2005). Besley and colleagues identify two varieties of ROSCAs, as follows:

> The first, and most prevalent, type allocates its funds randomly. In a *random Rosca,* members commit to putting a fixed sum of money into a “pot” for each period of the life of the Rosca. Lots are drawn, and the pot is randomly allocated to one of the members. In the next period, the process repeats itself, except that the previous winner is excluded from the draw for the pot. The process continues, with every past winner excluded, until each member of the Rosca has received the pot once… [In a] *bidding Rosca*, one individual receives the pot in an earlier period than another by bidding more, in the form of a pledge of higher contributions to the Rosca, or one one-time side

> payments to the other Rosca members. Under a bidding Rosca, individuals may still receive the pot once – the bidding process merely establishes priority. (1993: 793)

Given the informal nature of ROSCAs, a high degree of cultural and social capital is required in order to avoid the risk of members defaulting on loans (Portes & Haller, 2005). The Vietnamese equivalent to the ROSCA is known as *chơi hụi*, which translates into English as 'the game of borrowing'. In Australia, Thomas (1999) is the only researcher to have documented the practice of *chơi hụi* among the Vietnamese. She describes this informal lending and credit system as a 'method of obtaining money quickly' (1999: 125), and found that many Vietnamese people participate in several *hụi* games at once. This allows them to 'amass a large amount of cash in a short time' (1999: 126) and in large part, explains how Vietnamese people can buy their own homes in spite of persistently high unemployment rates. Incidences of members escaping with *hụi* funds were also identified by Thomas but due to the underground nature of this banking system, such incidences are rarely presented to the police.

The current knowledge base of Vietnamese involvement in the informal economy remains empirically thin, despite scholars such as Thomas (1999) and Viviani (1996) suggesting its widespread existence within Vietnamese ethnic economies. Viviani, for example, points out that 'some major real estate purchases were done with suitcases of cash and the keeping of double sets of books was common' (1996: 93). The extent to which such informal activities is tied to the criminal economy – particularly the illicit drug trade - has yet to be fully addressed by academic research in Australia, although many media reports have indicated a strong connection between the two. On the issue of crime, a key concern that has consistently been at the forefront of public, political and academic debates – and even more so in recent years – is the involvement of a subsector of the Vietnamese-Australian population in the use and distribution of illicit drugs.

3.4.3 Vietnamese involvement in the illicit drug trade

The association between the Vietnamese (particularly its youth) with images of gang violence and drug crimes have been strongly etched in the Australian public mind since at least the early 1990s (Dwyer, 2009). Since their arrival in Australia, the leading issue that captured the nation's attention, and one that has arguably engendered the most fear

and panic among the public, was the perceived 'heroin epidemic' (Rowe, 2007: 99) in areas of high Vietnamese concentration. In her own ethnography on the lives of young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users in Melbourne, Australia, Ngo observes that:

> Public alarm surrounding the perceived heroin crisis also created threats to public health and safety that subsequently sparked numerous community forums on drug use in the Vietnamese-Australian community and government research on drug use in local communities, with some specifically focusing on Asian crime in Australia. (2010: 19)

Particularly in the mid to late 1990s, Australian media reports were saturated with sensationalist stories, which were mostly dependent upon statements and observations made by senior law enforcement in order to add legitimacy to their claims (Quek, 1997; Rowe, 2007). In his analysis of how the drug problem was constructed in the context of Melbourne, Rowe writes:

> The full impact of the moral panic was felt on 28 November 1995 when Chief Supt Ritchie met the state-wide press corps and declared of the Footscray drug trade: "It is an extreme problem. It really is, from my perspective, a war". Ritchie provided journalists with an "enemy" for this war, blaming the flood of pure-cut price heroin on gangs of "very very violent" Cabramatta drug dealers "infiltrating the Footscray drug scene…including members of a notorious Vietnamese gang called 5T". (Rowe, 2007: 102)

The Vietnamese gang 5T 'rose to notoriety in September 1994 when John Newman – a local politician who had spoken out against Vietnamese crime – was gunned down outside his home in Cabramatta' (Lintner, 2002: 310). According to Lintner, the 5T is 'the most vicious of Australia's new ethnic-Asian street gangs' (2002: 310) and is defined by a 'culture of murder, extortion and drug dealing' (2002: 310) Lintner adds that 'the 5T controlled the streets of Cabramatta and had made it the heroin capital of Australia' (2002: 311). Coomber and Maher confirm that 'this is certainly a prevalent view of the drug market in Cabramatta and has been for some time' (2006: 721). Given that much of what the western world knows of illicit drug markets is derived from the 'New York/North American literature along with popular cinema, fiction and other media' (Coomber & Maher, 2006: 710), Coomber and Maher point out that it is no surprise that the construction of Australia's drug problem is 'reminiscent of the crack

cocaine markets of 1980s New York', which are characterised by 'rabid mistrust, instability and high levels of violence' (2006: 719).

The media's 'sensationalised, biased and narrowly framed' (Hughes et al., 2011: 285) representation of the drug problem is 'not a rare phenomenon' (Coomber et al., 2000: 217) and has been the subject of much scrutiny among many scholars (Coomber et al., 2000; Sirin, 2011; Taylor, 2008). Such criticisms have been particularly necessary given the media's 'harmful' influence in triggering 'knee-jerk drug crackdowns and punitive responses' (Murji, 1998: 69). In their analysis of the media's coverage on Australia's drug problem during the peak of the perceived heroin crisis of the mid to late 1990s, Beyer and Reid identify that the Australian public were typically bombarded with 'colourful headlines' such as 'Vietnamese gangs a big crime threat' or 'Police report predicts rise in Asian Crime' (2001: 140). Similarly, Rodd and Leber argue that such negative reportage sends strong messages to the public that Vietnamese young people are nothing more than 'violent drug users, criminals, homeless, anti-social, a social menace, rejecting family values and rejected by their communities' (1997: 19). Such 'drug scares', according to Beyer and Reid:

> …blame the individual immorality and personal behaviour for endemic social and structural problems [and] divert attention and resources from the larger, causal problems. When there is no distinction made between people *with* problems, and people *as* problems, there is a tendency to blame the victims of social injustice. (2000: 141)

Australia – like other parts of the world – has had a long history of blaming 'others' for its drug problems, beginning with the Chinese in the nineteenth century, who were portrayed as 'the sensual Chinaman' luring 'innocent [White] girls' into opium dens (Manderson, 1999: 181). According to Manderson, the treatment of the Vietnamese by both politicians and the media during the heroin crisis of the 1990s 'could have been lifted verbatim from the newspapers of 100 years ago – as if drug use and violence were somehow imported or un-Australian vices' (1999: 184).

For a problem that was identified as 'an epidemic' and one that prompted a Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry in 1995 into Asian Organised Crime, and the launch of a National Illicit Drug Strategy 'Tough on Drugs' in 1997 (Ngo, 2010: 19), it

is astounding that the voices of those under inquiry were largely missing from the public debate. According to Quek's (1997) analysis of the representation of Vietnamese young people in the media, those who were considered to be 'key informants' on the issue of Vietnamese involvement in illicit drugs were law enforcement personnel, journalists and to a limited degree, representatives from the Vietnamese community – not the young Vietnamese people themselves. In fact, Rodd and Leber (1997) point out that in their content analysis of over 80 newspapers, only one article represented the voice of Vietnamese young people on the issue of gangs, crime and drugs.

Not until the early part of the 2000s did the academic domain begin to witness a growth in studies that were focused on eliciting the perspectives of Vietnamese drug users and distributors. However, with the exception of Beyer's (2004)[3] study into higher-level drug traffickers, research into illicit drugs in Australia has generally focused on the user dimension of the drug problem. Any insights into the supply-side are limited to the experiences of user-dealers within street-level drug markets. With drug users taking research priority, most studies have approached the drug problem from a public health perspective, which includes understanding the risks and harm associated with Vietnamese injecting drug-users such as blood-borne viruses and overdose (Hellard et al., 2006; Higgs et al., 2008; Ho & Maher, 2008; Webber, 2002). Within this realm, researchers also observe cultural characteristics that inform vulnerability to risk-taking behaviours associated with heroin use, with particular emphasis on 'trust and obligation, stoicism, the importance of 'face' and beliefs in fate' (Ho & Maher, 2008: 420). In addition, Higgs and colleagues (2008) provide valuable insight into how structures of gender and culture intersect to influence injecting risk behaviours among Vietnamese female heroin users in Melbourne, Australia. In another study, Ngo and Griffiths (2010) reveal that the most common means of addressing heroin issues for Vietnamese-Australian young people and their families is to 'return to the homeland' of Vietnam for a short period of time. With respect to how social structural issues shape the disproportionate use of heroin among Vietnamese-Australians, it has been identified that issues of 'high unemployment, poor English proficiency, experiences of racism, social and economic difficulties, intergenerational conflicts and acculturation' play a significant role (Reid et al., 2002: 127).

[3] Findings from interviews with incarcerated Vietnamese drug traffickers were embargoed from the public version of Beyer's thesis, which explains why I have not included data from her research.

Although the Vietnamese continue to be implicated in contemporary debates about Australia's drug problem, the conversation has since shifted away from the involvement of young Vietnamese-Australian user-dealers in open street-based markets. It is reasonable to suggest that a key reason behind this shift relates to the fact that Australia's illicit drug markets – as is the case with most western drug markets – is no longer characterised by open street-level dealing. The intense police crackdowns that occurred under the Howard Government's 'zero tolerance approach' ultimately transformed the nature of drug dealing from being 'open' to 'closed[4]' (Aitken et al., 2002; Coomber & Maher, 2006; Maher and Dixon, 1999; May & Hough, 2004). Of more concern in recent years is the disturbing trend of Vietnamese people participating in the dangerous act of personally transporting heroin from Việt Nam to Australia as drug couriers. Heffernan – who writes from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) – reports that 'in 2007, 33 people charged with offences relating to this dangerous and potentially deadly practice were carrying a total of 7.2kg of heroin and 1.7kg of cocaine, valued at $2.5 million' (2009: 22). Of those charged, Heffernan identifies that they arrived on flights from Việt Nam, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Cambodia, China, Malaysia and India. More recently, 2009 AFP statistics reveal that more heroin couriers come into Australia from Việt Nam than any other country (Australian Federal Police, 2009: 18).

Alongside recent reports of Vietnamese participation in mule-work is the significant rise in the number of Vietnamese arrests associated with the urban cultivation of cannabis in and around the suburbs of Melbourne. Dowling (2013), for example, reports that based on statistics produced by the Victorian Police, approximately 50 per cent of people charged with cultivating a commercial quantity of cannabis in the last five years are Vietnamese. Although there has yet to be any scholarly reference on the involvement of Vietnamese people in mule-work – at both the international and local level – the Australian experience of Vietnamese participation in cannabis cultivation appears to be part of a global trend mirrored in Canada (Bouchard & Nguyen, 2011), Britain (Silverstone & Salvage, 2010) and the Netherlands (Schoenmakers et al., 2013). More

[4] Based on May and Hough's definition, 'open markets can be defined as the ones that are open to any buyer, with no requirement for prior introduction to the seller, and few barriers to access' and 'closed markets are ones in which buyers and sellers will only do business together if they know and trust each other or if a third party vouches for them' (2004: 550-51).

generally, Decorte and colleagues point out that in comparison to cocaine and heroin, which are still produced in a small number of developing countries, 'cannabis is now cultivated the world over' (2011: 1). They further observe that 'from Europe to the Americas and Oceania, import substitution in the cannabis market has been noticed in almost every developed country around the world' (2011: 1). In Australia, Leggett reports that 'the importation of cannabis has declined greatly in recent years, owing in part to law enforcement efforts and in part to increased domestic production, in particular indoor production' (2006: 80).

In the Canadian context, scholars point out that the Vietnamese, along with outlawed motorcycle gangs such as Hell's Angels, control approximately 85 per cent of Canada's cannabis market (Schoenmakers et al., 2013: 1). Bouchard and Nguyen's empirical study identify that Vietnamese-Canadians view cannabis cultivation as an opportunity to make a living and 'the illegality of it was just a consequence' (2011: 114). Specifically, one of the Vietnamese cannabis cultivators they interviewed revealed that 'in the Vietnamese culture, participation in cultivation remains quite secretive' and 'is something that people do with their family members' (2011: 114). In Britain, Silverstone and Savage connect the recent proliferation of 'Vietnamese-based cannabis cultivation industry' (2010: 27) to the 'new arrivals' of Vietnamese overseas students and illegal immigrants, who, in their words, 'are a significant component of the networks which relate to the cannabis cultivation business' (2010: 22). Silverstone and Savage also suggest an indirect relationship between people-smuggling operations and the cannabis cultivation business in the UK. Drawing on interviews with law enforcement and Vietnamese illegal immigrants, Silverstone and Savage observe:

> Our respondents arrived in the United Kingdom by means of people-smuggling operations which involved a number of countries and which came at a considerable cost for those smuggled into the United Kingdom…It is not clear whether the prospect of working in cannabis cultivation is raised explicitly by those running people-smuggling schemes when agreements on the process of smuggling are made, but it seems likely that many will know about this option when they choose to travel illegally to the United Kingdom…Clearly, in terms of arrangements for payment of debts incurred by illegal migration, working in cannabis cultivation can be seen in part as a form of paying off debts. (2010: 24)

Contrary to what has been found in the United Kingdom, the Vietnamese cannabis cultivators in Schoenmakers and colleagues' (2013) Netherlands study were predominantly Dutch citizens who had resided in the Netherlands for a long period of time.

Based on recent Australian police reports, it appears that the Vietnamese cannabis groups in Australia share some similar patterns identified in other countries, particularly as it pertains to the growing involvement of illegal immigrants in the UK's cannabis trade. For example, recent Victorian Police figures released to the public reveal that in the last financial year, 71 Vietnamese nationals were charged for their roles in cannabis cultivation (Dowling, 2013). However, while the Vietnamese in Australia have had a long history of being associated with the distribution of more hard drugs such as heroin, Vietnamese involvement in the Canadian, European and British drug markets are reportedly confined to the cannabis market. Furthermore, Silverstone and Savage point out that it is only recently that the Vietnamese community has been 'officially identified as being associated with organised crime or drug dealing in the United Kingdom' (2010: 16). This is also the case in Europe. Where motives are concerned, an interesting finding that was briefly mentioned in Schoenmakers and colleagues' (2013) Netherlands study, and one that is highly relevant to the context of this study, is the identification of the link between gambling debt and drug distribution and cultivation.

3.4.4 The nexus between gambling and drug trafficking among the Vietnamese in Australia

Running alongside public and academic concerns about Vietnamese involvement in the illicit drug trade is the deep-seated issue of problem gambling among this population. Since the Australian government deregulated and legitimised gambling in the mid-1990s, a small number of studies have investigated the trend of Vietnamese-Australian participation in casino gambling (Chui & O'Connor, 2006; Raylu & Oei, 2004; Scull & Woolcock, 2005). In 1997, for example, one study reported that people of 'South-East Asian appearance' made up 25-31 per cent of patrons who entered Melbourne's Crown Casino (Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 1997). Hallebone points out that such

statistics are 'noteworthy' given that 'the Victorian State population has much lower than 30 per cent of Asian residents' (1997: 368).

Based on her consultations with Vietnamese welfare agencies and Vietnamese specific service providers in Melbourne, Tran (2000) reports that it was not until the introduction of the Crown casino in 1995 that service providers started witnessing high levels of gambling-related issues presented by Vietnamese families at services. Issues associated with resettlement such as financial pressure, unemployment, limited English proficiency, limited social support, lowered status, and social and cultural differences are all identified as being 'inextricably linked to social issues of gambling' (Tran, 2000: 3) in the Vietnamese community. Similarly, Chui (2008) – in a study of migrant Vietnamese-Australian women problem gamblers – observe that lack of alternative recreational and leisure venues for relaxation is also a key reason for gambling. For example, one participant in Chui's study emphasised:

> [Vietnamese people] can't go to the movies because they can't understand. They go to Chinatown but they don't understand Chinese movies… They can't go to clubs or pubs. So what are they supposed to do? Gambling… they don't need to speak good English. (2008: 278)

Gambling venues such as casinos are frequently cited as providing a physical and social space in which Vietnamese people can come together and feel a sense of community connectedness. Additionally, Tse and colleagues note that gambling provides individuals temporary relief from 'painful personal realities' (2004: 2). Specifically, they observe that:

> In our clinical work, we often hear clients describing that when they are gambling they are either not thinking of anything or they are only thinking of the excitement and glamour of winning and being in the casino. (2004: 2)

The downside of this form of entertainment is the negative impact on the family posed by problem gambling (Tran, 2000). Scull and Woolcock observe that, unlike the problem gamblers identified in other culturally and linguistically diverse groups, culture plays a significant role in explaining how the Vietnamese approached gambling. For example, it was found that the disproportionate spending among Vietnamese-Australian gamblers (Raylu & Oei, 2004) and unrealistic profit-taking was based on a cultural belief that casino gambling involves skill as well as luck (Chui & O'Connor, 2006; Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010; Scull & Woolcock, 2005; Zysk, 2003). This 'illusion of

control-belief' (Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010: 34), in the context of gambling, is often captured in the notion of 'beating the system'. As Nguyen and Dinh elucidate:

> [Trying to beat the system] is an attractive feature of gambling because to be able to survive in [Việt Nam], people need to outwit and beat a larger system: the government. Gambling at the casino may be especially appealing to members of the Vietnamese community because it brings to life this powerful mindset. (1998: 3)

Not only do cultural beliefs influence the gambling behaviour of problem gamblers, but they also shape their help-seeking behaviour (Raylu & Oei, 2004). Scull and Woolcock, for example, observe a 'pervasive sense of denial' among problem gamblers, arising from 'enormous shame and stigma' (2005: 29). The upshot is that problem gamblers do not consult professional services but try to resolve their position on their own and within their families for the sake of 'keeping face' (Tse et al., 2004: 3). This has consequently led to considerable social problems including personal financial pressures, emotional distress, domestic violence, employment difficulties and suicide (Wheeler et al., 2010: 7).

Tran, for example, reports that a high number of gambling-related cases among Vietnamese people involve some form of family violence, which includes financial, emotional, psychological and physical violence. The following case, as told by a family support worker in Tran's study, is illustrative of the extreme consequences faced by Vietnamese families as a result of problem gambling:

> It's usually the women that come to seek help. The men usually leave and dump the kids on to the mum. Women always accept the responsibilities. They're always left with the children and whole lot of debt. This lady was left with her husband's $20,000 debt from 'hui' (community bank). People hassled the wife for money, knock on the door. They were quite dangerous because she could get beat up if she didn't pay. Besides the physical impact of not having any food, the threat of being evicted from their flat and having no gas and electricity – they were fearful. She was so depressed. When I went to her flat it was so chaotic. The children were left to their own devices – the children are really at risk. (Tran, 2000: 7)

Most recently, sporadic media reports have asserted a connection between gambling and drug trafficking. One current affairs show, for example, reports that 'criminal networks' are 'actively recruiting [Vietnamese] problem gamblers playing poker machines at pubs

and clubs, to traffic heroin and cultivate cannabis' (Thompson & Bell, 2011). A Sydney newspaper describes 'recruiters' who 'approach struggling gamblers with an offer to lend them money and, when they fail to meet repayments, pressure them into becoming mules to pay back the money' (Ralston, 2011). A Melbourne newspaper quotes the president of the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association as claiming that Vietnamese women are overrepresented in Victorian prisons because of 'venturing into crime to repay gambling debts.' Contrary to other reports, she observes that electronic gaming machines have little appeal to Vietnamese women, unlike the 'glamour' of the casino:

> In Asia people make bets on anything, on the rain, but the attraction of the casino is something new and very effective. Those women, they usually don't go to a psychologist or a family therapist. They say the best way to forget or escape is to go to the casino. The casino staff make you very welcome. (Munro, 2010)

Up until now, the academic domain has treated problem gambling and drug trafficking as two mutually exclusive issues affecting the Vietnamese population in Australia. In his international review of the literature on gambling, Spapens (2008) observes that no definitive conclusions can be drawn on the nexus between gambling and crime as there is 'hardly any systematic research' (2008: 54) in this area. According to Spapens, this is because most studies are more focused on the issue of how best to diagnose and treat gambling addiction. The few academic studies that do explore the relationship between gambling and crime generally reduce this relationship to quantifiable data. Most commonly used is the measuring instrument known as the 'South Oaks Gambling Screen' (SOGS), which is a questionnaire made up of 20 'yes or no' questions designed to establish whether someone is a pathological gambler. To determine whether there is a link between problem gambling and crime, this instrument is often used in conjunction with self-reports among various samples including the general population, prisoners and problem gamblers seeking treatment (Productivity Commission, 1999; Spapens, 2008). According to Wheeler and colleagues (2010), such approaches are unable to establish robust statistical links between gambling and crime. At best, the literature is suggestive that problem gamblers are most likely to commit acquisitive crimes such as fraud, robbery or property offences to fund their gambling behaviour (Crofts, 2003).

Any links made between gambling and the illicit drug trade have been discussed in the broader context of the gambling industry as a whole and how criminal organisations such as the mafia launder proceeds from drug trafficking through various forms of legal gambling services such as casino gambling (Spapens, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2010). Moreover, while Australian media reports have suggested that Vietnamese casino gamblers are being recruited into the illicit drug trade by loan sharks operating at the casino, Spapens (2008) found that loan sharking – as a personal service offered in connection with gambling – is overlooked in the academic domain. In fact, Spapens (2008) found that the only mention of loan sharking in the context of gambling was by US researcher Peter Reuter in his book *Disorganised Crime*, which was published 30 years ago in 1983. Thirty years on and still, not much can be ascertained about loan shark operations except for the following description provided by Spapens:

> … that high interest rates were applied, that violence was threatened or used if the loan was not paid off on time, and that the financiers were either serious criminals or had links with the criminal world, in some cases with organised crime. (2008: 34)

To the best of my knowledge, there is currently no academic research that has articulated the connection between gambling, loan sharking and drug trafficking at the individual level.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a detailed account of Vietnamese lives in Australia, including an historical overview of the trajectory of Vietnamese arrival and resettlement in Australia, followed by a description of their contemporary social, cultural and economic worlds. The objective of doing so is to situate the analysis of drug trafficking within the broader structural conditions under which they carry out their day-to-day lives. Of further importance is the introduction of the relationship between gambling and drug market participation in the Vietnamese community in Melbourne. Specifically, by drawing attention to the specific physical and social context of gambling venues (for example, casinos), this chapter illustrates how larger structural forces express themselves in the day-to-day gambling practices of Vietnamese people. It also draws attention to how the 'specificity of individual contexts' (Duff, 2007: 514), including the 'interaction of

bodies, emotions and physical materials' that make up such contexts, mediate Vietnamese people's involvement in the illicit drug trade as traffickers.

CHAPTER FOUR
Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed account of the research methods employed, the type of data collected, and how it was analysed. It also describes key methodological and analytical issues encountered during the journey of bringing this research to fruition. The chapter opens with a justification for the choice of research method. Specifically, it argues that a qualitative methodology not only 'generates data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences' (Silverman, 1993: 91), but it also 'provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects' (Miller & Glassner, 1997: 100). Such an approach is particularly crucial in the context of researching drug trafficking given that their voices remain largely unheard. Furthermore, the paucity of research in this area has led to a situation in which researchers in this field are 'plagued by insufficient evidence on which to base hypotheses and methodology' (Browne et al., 2003: 324). With respect to the small number of studies on drug traffickers, Miller points out that there is no active dialogue among researchers concerning issues of methodological rigor (2005: 72). By recounting the research process in detail, I hope to 'make the process more transparent for scholarly audiences' to 'ensure that appropriate standards are applied' (Miller, 2005: 72).

4.1 Choice of research methods

Most disciplines approach drug trafficking as an economic phenomenon and have correspondingly defined it in quantitative terms. While a quantitative analysis of drug trafficking is helpful in elucidating information about key trends such as the (estimated) size and structure of the drug market, it is limited in its ability to interpret such trends from a cultural and social standpoint. Questions concerning how 'a wide range of circumstantial, situational, social and cultural factors' (Ho, 2006: 37) influence and shape drug trafficking trends falls outside the scope of quantitative research methods.

As this thesis is concerned with gaining social and cultural insight into the circumstances and experiences that shape Vietnamese women's pathway into drug trafficking, a qualitative research design was chosen to inform both the process of data

collection and data analysis. More specifically, the qualitative research tool of in-depth interviewing was employed to elicit Vietnamese women's perspectives on why and how they became involved in drug trafficking.

4.2 Researching drug trafficking in the prison setting

This study was primarily borne out of a concern to understand why there has been a significant rise in the number of Vietnamese women entering the Victorian prison system for drug trafficking. Building upon Decker and Chapman's view that 'key knowledge about drug smuggling comes from those who smuggle drugs' (2008: 4), this thesis is premised on the belief that the people who can best shed meaningful light on this recent phenomenon are the Vietnamese women themselves. Based on this line of reasoning, it was only logical to situate the process of data collection within the prison setting.

Research was conducted across two women's prison institutions in Victoria, Australia between November 2010 and April 2011. Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC) is a maximum-security women's prison located in Melbourne's western suburb of Deer Park. It is Victoria's largest women's prison and at the time of research, it held 313 prisoners. Tarrengower Prison is a minimum-security women's prison located 136 km north of Melbourne, in a town called Maldon. It is a smaller prison than DPFC, with 72 prisoners at the time of research. The majority of the research interviews were conducted at DPFC, as there was a higher proportion of Vietnamese women prisoners at this location.

In choosing to speak to incarcerated Vietnamese women about their pathways into drug trafficking, I was well aware of the existing criticisms that take aim at studies which rely on incarcerated drug traffickers' retrospective accounts. Natarajan identifies some of the key criticisms:

> It is difficult to evaluate the accounts given by the dealers who may either downplay or exaggerate their roles. In addition, imprisoned dealers, especially those who agree to be interviewed, are unlikely to be representative of the broader population of traffickers. (2000: 274)

In countering such criticisms, Desroches observes that 'there was little evidence' to suggest that the incarcerated high-level drug traffickers interviewed in his study 'exaggerated their accounts, lied, or avoided telling the truth about their activities' (2005: 8). In a later paper, Desroches argues that given that the 'current state of knowledge' on drug traffickers is 'incomplete and fragmentary', priority should be directed towards obtaining as much knowledge in this area as possible (2007: 840). It is only then that researchers are in a better position to engage in a more vigorous debate about the methodological issues associated with researching drug traffickers.

In terms of criticisms that take aim at the representativeness of incarcerated populations, Natarajan argues that it is almost impossible to gauge the 'broader population of traffickers' (2000: 274). While previous researchers have successfully immersed themselves in the lives of active drug traffickers through the ethnographic tradition (for example, Akhtar & South, 2000; Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008), Natarajan (2000) points out that the majority of these studies have focused on street-level dealing. In relation to investigating higher levels of drug trafficking, Natarajan argues that the ethnographic method 'cannot be readily adapted' as 'direct contact with these dealers may involve significant risks for the researcher as well as for third parties who help to locate the dealers for interview' (2000: 274). It is for this reason that the prison setting is often viewed as one of the only viable alternatives in which researchers can access information about the world of drug traffickers. In my own research experience, I found that prisoners actually extended our knowledge on drug trafficking.

In the early stages of conceptualising this research project, I had anticipated on the basis of media coverage that most Vietnamese women prisoners were 'mules' who smuggled heroin into the country from Việt Nam. Before commencing the recruitment phase, I had an informal meeting with the Vietnamese Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO) of the women's prison, whose role is to provide support and assistance to Vietnamese women prisoners in Victoria. As the MLO would be assisting me in the recruitment of the women through the provision of a list of potential participants, the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the nature and eligibility criteria of this research. It was during this meeting that I was informed that the proportion of 'mules' was a small proportion of Vietnamese women prisoners, far outnumbered by those incarcerated for domestic distribution of heroin and domestic cultivation of cannabis. Prior to my meeting with

the MLO, I was already aware that the drug trafficking trends among the Vietnamese in Australia had been shifting away from street-level dealing towards more covert drug distribution operations. However, the knowledge that they had diversified into the urban cannabis market had taken me by surprise given that there had been no Victorian reports of Vietnamese involvement in cannabis cultivation at the time of designing this study. In light of this discovery, the scope of the study was extended from mules to all drug crimes.

In this respect, the prison had provided the setting from which I could access women who had participated in a wide range of drug trafficking activities. Such access may have been much more difficult to achieve through ethnographic fieldwork given that previous ethnographic studies have mostly been confined to the investigation of specific roles of drug trafficking within a particular type of drug market.

4.2.1 'Procedural ethics': Accessing incarcerated drug traffickers

Guillemin and Gillam observe that for the most part, qualitative (and quantitative) researchers generally encounter similar ethical issues during their research experience, which is often described with 'considerable emotion and crystal-clear recall' (2004: 262). In a similar observation, Israel notes that 'some researchers are able to operate in relatively predictable contexts where standardised assurances about material may be included in a covering letter with a questionnaire' (2004b: 715). However, where research into illegal activities and behaviours are concerned, ethics becomes more of a 'thorny' (Crewe, 2006: 347) terrain which researchers must carefully navigate.

In the early stages of designing the methodology, I was aware that ethical conduct and compliance is of particular concern to this study because (a) the topic of research is in the area of drug trafficking and (b) the research is set in the prison environment. In order to begin this research, I had to obtain approval from three institutions: Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC), Corrections Victoria[5] and the Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC). This process of obtaining ethical clearance, which Guillemin and Gillam refer to as 'procedural

[5] As this study is concerned with researching the Vietnamese women prison population in Victoria, a formal endorsement from Corrections Victoria needed to be obtained prior to submitting an ethics application to the JHREC.

ethics' (2004: 262), is currently not well articulated by researchers in the field of illicit drugs.

In reviewing the methodological sections of similar criminological studies, I found that most had glossed over the formal ethics process. In the majority of cases, the only reference made was the HREC from which researchers obtained their ethics approval. Given that criminological research is commonly plagued by a series of ethical challenges, it is of critical importance that researchers provide a reflexive account of their experiences with procedural ethics, particularly with respect to any issues that arose during their encounters with HRECs. Israel, for example, identify that criminologists often face great difficulties during the process of ethical review due to the 'sensitive nature of the subject matter; vulnerability of particular kinds of participants (youth, Indigenous people, and prisoners); [and] attitudes of criminal justice institutions, who perform the role of gatekeepers to research' (2004a: 18).

To avoid the many complications and difficulties that criminologists have routinely encountered with HRECs (Israel, 2004a), I developed two main strategies: first, to anticipate the 'likely concerns and objections of the HREC' (Israel, 2004a: 46) by drawing on existing case studies (Fitzgerald & Hamilton, 1996; Fitzgerald & Hamilton, 1997; Israel, 2004a; Israel & Hay, 2006); and second, by personally consulting with researchers[6] who had previously conducted studies with incarcerated drug traffickers in order to understand the ethical steps they had taken in their own research.

In the early stages of research, I encountered a procedural ethics dilemma that subsequently delayed the commencement of interviews. Although I had met all HRECs' requirements in terms of the methodological design, the issue I was confronted with related to the conflicting views held by different HRECs about the potential value of my research. At the time of submission to SUHREC, I had developed research questions that were in line with the objective of advancing academic knowledge in the field of drug trafficking. For example, I was interested in exploring the key concept of agency in the context of women drug traffickers, given that their involvement in the drug trade has traditionally been viewed through the lens of victimisation. While SUHREC

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[6] I consulted with Australian researcher Lorraine Beyer, who interviewed high-level incarcerated heroin dealers in Victoria and NSW correctional facilities as part of her PhD thesis and UK researcher Jennifer Fleetwood, who interviewed incarcerated cocaine traffickers in Quito, Ecuador.

approved the nature of such research questions, the response from Corrections Victoria was as follows:

> Such a research does not seem to be concerned with prisoners and the prison system as such, which raises questions about the potential value of the research in terms of it resulting in findings that might inform future correctional practice. (personal email correspondence)

I was now confronted with the tension between balancing the goal of addressing the academic knowledge gap on drug traffickers with fulfilling the research requirements expected by the prison institution. As the overarching concern of this study is to explore why there has been a significant rise in the number of Vietnamese women incarcerated for offences related to drug trafficking, I decided to reshape the focus of the research questions so that it was in line with the objectives and priorities of Corrections Victoria and the Department of Justice, without compromising the academic objectives. This was achieved by conducting a literature review on studies that had previously been approved by the criminal justice system as well as a review of their past and present policies and strategies. This process resulted in the following research questions:

(1) What are the key circumstances surrounding Vietnamese women in Australia prior to their incarceration and what is the relationship of these circumstances to their involvement in drug trafficking?

(2) How are the opportunities for Vietnamese women to enter the illicit drug trade shaped by, and determined by their ethnicity?

(3) How do Vietnamese women in Australia perceive the risks associated with drug trafficking? More specifically, how are coercion, victimisation, choice and agency constituted in the context of Vietnamese women's movement into, and participation within the illicit drug trade?

Regarding the methodological protocol and ethical issues that were considered in the ethics application, it was determined that data would be collected through in-depth interviews, which were, with participants' consent, all tape-recorded. To protect anonymity, participants were asked to provide verbal consent rather than sign written consent forms to participate in this study. In terms of confidentiality, participants' real

identities were replaced with pseudonyms at the earliest stage of data collection. Participants were also counselled to avoid giving specific information such as names and details of specific criminal events for which they or any other third party had been arrested (Israel, 2004a). In instances where participants were being too specific, they were first given a warning and if they persisted with disclosing too much information, I turned off the tape-recorder. Beyer points out that taking such precautions are necessary because 'in Australia, no research into illegal behaviour is immune from the possibility of some or all of the research material being subpoenaed' (2004: 97).

Although such protocols complied with National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines for ethical conduct in research involving humans, these guidelines were 'rudimentary' (Coupland, 2008: 47) in providing me with a practical framework from which I could draw upon during 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 265) that arose during the course of data collection. It is here that I now turn to what Guillemin and Gillam refer to as the second dimension of ethics: 'ethics in practice' (2004: 262).

4.2.2 'Ethics in practice': Interviewing incarcerated drug traffickers

Guillemin and Gillam define 'ethics in practice' as 'the day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research' (2004: 264). They argue that 'it is within the dimension of ethics in practice that the researcher's ethical competence comes to the fore' (2004: 269). Upon entering the research field, it quickly became clear that some of the most ethically challenging moments were not, as originally anticipated, encountered in the context of the research interviews. Rather, many of the 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 265) I was confronted with arose during what would otherwise be considered the mundane moments of daily prison life. To contextualise how such situations arose, the following section describes the day-to-day experiences of researching in the prison setting.

Researching in the prison setting

The research interviews were conducted over a period of six months, from November 2010 to April 2011. The primary research site was at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre

(DPFC); I only visited Tarrengower women's prison twice during the course of the data collection, as there were only a small number of eligible Vietnamese women prisoners. On the days that I visited DPFC, I usually arrived at 9am and stayed until 4pm. Entry into the prison would commence with a security ID check followed by a bag and body search by a prison officer. On the first day at DPFC, I encountered three separate experiences that were to be consistent occurrences throughout the course of the data collection. The following extract from my field notes captures these experiences:

> Arrived at prison at 9:30 this morning but was held up at the Gatehouse for 45 minutes because the Gate staff had trouble locating my name on the prison database. The name needed to match up with my driver's licence, which is Van Hong Thi Roslyn Le (although the correct Vietnamese order should be Lê Thị Hồng Vân Roslyn). A prison officer mistakenly recorded it as Hong Le. When we finally retrieved my name in the computer system, the staff made jokes about the confusing nature of my name, which I found really strange and offensive…As I was being escorted by a prison officer to the building where the interviews would take place, we engaged in small chat and discussed why I was visiting the prison. I told him about my research, to which he laughingly replied, 'there's a joke amongst the staff here that in 10 years' time, this prison will no longer be called the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre but the Dame Phyllis Nguyễn[7] Centre'. Once inside the building, I was introduced to the prison officer who would assist me in calling the Vietnamese women (mostly over the PA system) to the interview room to commence the recruitment process. This turned out to be a very difficult process for two reasons (1) the prison officer often mispronounced the names; and (2) mixed up the order of the names. It is common practice in Vietnamese culture for girls to have the name 'Thị' directly following the family name. As many Vietnamese names are unisex, 'Thị' is often used as a gender indicator. However, the prison officer would often confuse this as the women's first names. (field notes, DPFC, 10 November 2010)

The frequent experiences of being held up at the prison Gatehouse combined with the mix-up of participants' names often delayed, or even halted recruitment and scheduled interviews on the day. Subsequently, a large portion of my time in prison was spent waiting around – a scenario that I had not anticipated. Although frustrating at times, it was also these mundane moments that afforded me the opportunity to get a glimpse into the daily functioning of prison life.

[7] 'Nguyễn' is a very common Vietnamese family name, much like 'Smith'.

At DPFC, the interviews were conducted inside what is known to staff and prisoners as the ‘program building’. As the name suggests, the program building is where most of the prison services and programs are delivered including counselling and treatment programs, housing services for pre-release prisoners and various training and educational classes. While my movement from the prison gatehouse to the program building was dependent upon being escorted by a prison officer, I was, to a large degree, free to walk inside the program building unaccompanied. This included sitting amongst the women prisoners while they waited for various appointments or classes. On any given day that I was present, the waiting area was bustling with women prisoners and it was immediately apparent that the program building was the hub of prison life. On one occasion while I was standing in the waiting area, I overheard a conversation between two women prisoners that took me by surprise given that it had taken place in the small confines of the prison context:

> Woman A: Hey love! How ya been? It’s been ages since I last saw ya!
> Woman B: Yeah I know. I’ve been keeping me self busy n’ that, just working n’ that.
> (Field notes, DPFC, 23 November 2010)

Such exchanges were in stark contrast to my early preconceptions of prison life. This was an experience also recounted by Denton (2001) in her own study of incarcerated women drug dealers in Victoria:

> The women I met in prison on that first day no way matched any of the stories I had heard. They were warm, friendly women… we could have been a group of women anywhere. (2001: 2)

It was also during these moments that I was given the unexpected opportunity to engage with the women participants outside the context of the interview room. Such casual interactions also raised some important ethical issues regarding the complex ‘role boundaries’ (Fry et al., 2005: 451) between the researcher and the participant. The majority of the Vietnamese women prisoners I encountered had very low levels of English proficiency, which often meant that when the Vietnamese speaking MLO was not available for assistance, they would often approach me, presumably because I was conveniently at hand and understood Vietnamese. In a similar experience to Ho, there were several times when I decided to step out of my researcher role and provide ‘small personal services’ (Ho, 2006: 44) for participants. In one such scenario, one Vietnamese

prisoner was standing at the reception desk waiting to make an appointment with the MLO, but when she saw me, she approached me instead with her enquiry. I had interviewed her a few weeks prior and learnt that she would soon be released from prison. In this particular encounter, she explained that since being in prison, her driver's licence had expired and she was unfamiliar with the process of how to renew it. At the forefront of her concerns was the fear that she had to disclose the fact that she had been in prison. When I explained to her that the process was very straightforward and that no explanations were required, I immediately saw the relief on her face. Other examples of 'small personal services' included acting as an interpreter between the women and the prison officer at the reception desk. Such assistance only concerned trivial matters such as explaining to the prison officer which service provider the women wished to meet.

I was initially tentative about getting involved in the participants' personal lives outside the interview context given that most of my previous readings about the role of the researcher during data collection have traditionally adopted an objective stance in which 'distance and non-involvement' is highly valued, while subjectivity is regarded as a potential 'contaminant' (Etherington, 2004: 25) . However, by not stepping out of my researcher role and assisting the women, I would have been doing a disservice to them, or, as Maher aptly argues, it would have been 'deeply unethical' (2002: 315). Such ad hoc encounters not only gave me the opportunity to 'incorporate reciprocity' (Harrison et al., 2001: 327) into my relationship with the participants following the interview, but it also allowed me to see first-hand the structural barriers that confront them in their day-to-day life. This group of Vietnamese women are one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in our society and echoing Coupland's (2008) argument, refusal to intervene through the provision of small personal services would have gone against my views of social justice.

I also noticed that the women were more relaxed about disclosing details about their personal lives and experiences during these less formal encounters. At both a personal and professional level, this provided me with a sense of reassurance that I had established a level of connection and trust with the women during the formal interviews. While some women took this opportunity to elaborate further on issues we had touched upon during our interviews such as the circumstances that initiated them into drug trafficking, others spoke intimately about their families. While it was much easier to tell

the women within the formal setting of the interview room to refrain from disclosing too much personal information, this was much harder to do in more casual encounters. On one occasion, during my visit to Tarrengower Prison, two of the Vietnamese women prisoners I had interviewed invited me back to their unit to have lunch with them and other Vietnamese women prisoners. When I explained to one of the participants that this was my first time visiting the prison units, she offered to show me around. The units are constructed just like any other house with bedrooms, a living area and kitchen. She then proceeded to show me her bedroom, which she described as her own private sanctuary away from the other women prisoners. It was during this moment that I was exposed to personal photographs of her children and I immediately felt uncomfortable when I recognised one of the people in the photographs: her daughter is an acquaintance of mine. As she was pointing out her children in the photos, I pretended that I did not recognise her daughter as one of my responsibilities as a researcher is to avoid situations that may result in participants feeling shame and embarrassment. During our interview, the participant had revealed some very personal and sensitive information about her family and had I told her that I knew her daughter, I would not only have caused her great discomfort but also a 'loss of face'.

There were other times when participants would ask personal questions about my own family. This was a particularly tricky situation to navigate because while I had a 'reciprocal desire' (Ellis & Berger, 2003: 162) to share stories about my own life, I also needed to be cautious as not to disclose too much information that could potentially identify my family. On one occasion, the prison was undertaking its routine lunchtime muster (or roll-call) of the women prisoners and as part of this protocol, no movement within the prison grounds is permitted until the correct number is tallied. This was how I found myself sitting on a couch, causally chatting for half an hour with one of the participants. She was very curious about my own family life in Australia and asked me what my parents did for a living. I told her that for most of my mother's working life in Australia, she worked as an outworker, sewing garments from home. I previously learnt from our interview that this participant had owned a medium-sized textile business and when she heard that my mother was a garment outworker, she asked me, 'where does your family live?' I was fine with answering this question because we live in an area that is commonly recognised as having a high concentration of Vietnamese residents.

However, when she found out that we lived in the same area where her textile business was located, she then asked, 'what's your mother's name because I'm sure she would've worked for me.' I did not want to offend her and create tension by explicitly refusing to answer her question, particularly when she had shared some of her most personal and painful stories with me. In order to sidestep this question, I simply told her that she probably wouldn't have known my mother as she sourced her garments from another area.

Reflexive awareness of the ethical issues that arise during research is a critical part of the research process and should not be interpreted as 'self-indulgent or narcissistic' (Etherington, 2004: 19). To use Etherington's definition, reflexivity is understood as:

> … an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret the world. (2004: 19)

At present, the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) is the primary source of guidance for the ethical conduct of *all* research involving human participants, and is currently underpinned by 'bioethically derived models of research ethics governance' (Israel & Hay, 2006: 144). Serious concerns have recently been raised by researchers within social science – particularly criminology – about the practicality in applying such models to research studies that fall outside the realm of biomedicine. It is imperative that future researchers to this area are well-equipped with practical knowledge about the ethical issues commonly associated with criminological research, but the only way this can be achieved is if researchers are more open, and transparent about their own ethical journey.

Reflexivity should not only be limited to the context of ethical conduct (Coupland, 2008). Following the tradition of feminist reflexive research, researcher reflexivity as a methodological paradigm is infused throughout my own research journey. This is because I firmly believe that 'the trustworthiness of the findings and outcomes of research' (Etherington, 2004: 32) can only be enhanced by 'interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-

critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: vii). In the remaining sections of this chapter, I explore how the collection, analysis and interpretation of the present research data are influenced by my own social position and experience.

4.3 Data collection

4.3.1 Locating myself: Being Vietnamese researching Vietnamese

The positivist notion of objective, value-free research is, in Ellis and Berger's words, a 'myth' that has long been 'debunked' by many researchers, particularly feminists (Ellis & Berger, 2003: 159) . As Riessman points out, 'the construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it' (1993: v). It is therefore necessary to locate myself in relation to the present research for the purpose of methodological transparency.

My own choice of research topic is, above all, of interest to me on a personal level. Although I have no prior experience in researching drug trafficking and the lives that make up this world, my understanding of, and connection with the drug trade is primarily through knowing people who were using heroin. This was during the final years of my secondary education, in the late 1990s – a period when the term 'heroin epidemic' was frequently thrown around in the media to depict the severity of the heroin problem in Melbourne and Sydney. So pervasive was heroin use among young Vietnamese-Australians that my parents would often tell my brother and I cautionary tales of sons and daughters of family friends who had been caught up in this problem, afraid that their own children would also be affected. While I was not directly involved in this world, I did have exposure to the people involved, and the streets in which drug dealing activities would often take place. My own personal knowledge of the lives and circumstances surrounding such individuals means I do not share the dominant public view that drug users are dangerous and morally depraved.

Upon reading news reports about the recent trend of (mostly) older Vietnamese-Australians engaging in drug trafficking, I felt a deep need to contextualise their involvement in the drug trade. This need was borne out of a combination of two key

factors: firstly, being Vietnamese, I personally wanted to understand what was happening in the social and economic landscape of Vietnamese lives in Australia to have caused such a significant number of women (and men) to become involved in drug trafficking. Secondly, it was through good timing that I had happened to be at the stage during my PhD where I was still deciding on a research topic. My educational background in sociology had provided me the foundation from which to explore this issue through an approach that appreciated the lived experiences of those under study, an approach that is in line with my own worldview.

In many respects, I have a great awareness and understanding of the participants' social, cultural and economic worlds through my own cultural background. I am a second-generation Vietnamese-Australian female, who was born in Australia to Vietnamese refugee parents. My parents escaped Việt Nam as part of the second wave of refugees in 1981 and after three days out at sea, they safely reached Malaysian shores and remained in a refugee camp for six months. Upon arrival in Australia, my family followed a similar trajectory to many other Vietnamese families. We lived in Melbourne's west, in a working-class suburb that has a high concentration of Vietnamese residents. The choice of location was no accident; most of my parents' family and friends lived in the area and it was only a short drive away from several Vietnamese business and commercial centres.

Lacking proficiency in the English language, coupled with a limited skill set, both my parents worked in unskilled and semi-skilled factory jobs, my father in the manufacturing industry and my mother in the garment industry as an outworker. When my father was made redundant from his factory job, he was unable to find employment elsewhere and settled on helping my mother sew garments from home. This was their main source of income for most of their working lives in Australia. One of my strongest memories growing up was of the roaring sound of garments being sewn in our garage.

My Vietnamese ethnicity and cultural background meant that the women participants considered me an 'insider', a status that is generally not granted to researchers who do not share the same minority ethnic status as their participants (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002). Adding further weight to Papadopoulos and Lee's argument, I found that being Vietnamese allowed 'more favourable access conditions and cooperation from a large number of [participants]' and encouraged a 'more equal context for interviewing, which

allowed more sensitive information to be collected' (2002: 261). Many of the participants in this study articulated the importance of speaking to a culturally competent researcher, with most admitting that they would not have participated in the study had I not been Vietnamese:

> It's because you are Vietnamese that I confide and speak to you. If you want to know anything, then I will tell you…but if a Westerner came here to ask me questions, then I would not speak because they are Westerners and I am Vietnamese. (Ai)

> By talking to you, I feel like I'm helping our Vietnamese community. With regard to Western people, I wouldn't speak to them because us Vietnamese don't have anyone to stand up for us to speak on our behalf. (Như)

> I chose to speak to you because you're Vietnamese and you understand our culture. If I spoke to a western researcher, firstly, we speak different languages and so I can't explain to them. Secondly, they don't understand us so I rather don't talk. They judge us and they think that we are lying or we make up stories. It just wastes our time. Because you're Vietnamese, I think that you would understand us better. (Tâm)

Due to their limited English proficiency, being able to speak Vietnamese was an important factor in gaining access to, and building rapport with the participants. However, what held greater value was the fact that I shared their culture, tradition and worldview:

> The Vietnamese culture is very complex; you know that. That's why it only makes sense if you help us. (Thủy)

From the participants' perspective, it was only through a deep sense of 'cultural awareness' and 'cultural sensitivity' (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002: 260-1) that I was able to build their trust. This was particularly crucial if I was to establish an open dialogue about an issue that is normally 'shrouded in secrecy' (Ellis & Berger, 2003: 160).

Having a deep understanding and knowledge about certain Vietnamese traditions and conventions was an important signifier to participants that not only did I understand their cultural world but that I was a part of it. This included something as simple as understanding the way Vietnamese names are conventionally structured. During the recruitment phase of the research process, I made the conscious decision to introduce

myself by my Vietnamese name (Lê Thị Hồng Vân) rather than my Anglo name (Roslyn). As I had touched on earlier in the chapter, the order of my Vietnamese name created problems getting pass the security check point at the prison gatehouse. Hart points out that the Vietnamese naming system is a source of 'much misunderstanding and confusion for Westerners' (2002: 24). In Vietnamese, the names are always written in the following order: family name, middle name and first names (Nguyen, 1985: 409). To add further confusion, Vietnamese females often have the name 'Thị' as their middle name to indicate their gender due to the unisex nature of Vietnamese names. It was clear that this was a source of frequent misunderstanding among the Vietnamese women prisoners and prison officers. As one participant, Thủy, expressed:

> You understand, you have a similar name to us. Everyone in here is called Thị! They always call us by our middle name rather than our first name so everyone in here is called Thị! How are we supposed to know who they are referring to?

Awareness of a person's age, and addressing them in accordance with the appropriate hierarchical order is also extremely important in Vietnamese culture (Ho, 2006). At the time of data collection, I was 28 years old and much younger than many of the participants. As a display of respect, I addressed the elder participants as 'chị' [elder sister] or 'cô' [aunty]. To those who were younger than me, I referred to them as 'em' [younger sister] or by first name. Participants also extended the same courtesy by either addressing me as 'con' [daughter], 'chị' or 'em'. The combination of respect and intimacy in this form of address minimised the power relations often inherent in qualitative research. For example, participants often became emotional when talking about their involvement in drug trafficking but were undeterred in continuing the interview. One participant, Ai, reassured me by stating: 'It's okay. If there's anything you want to ask me, just ask. We are just two people confiding in each other.'

Along with cultural background, my age and gender also shaped how participants engaged with, and structured their narratives. The majority of participants had children, many of whom were a similar age to myself. I was explicitly told by some participants that one of the key reasons why they responded to this study was because I reminded them of their own children, and by telling me their story, they could in some way prevent the younger generation of Vietnamese from taking this path. As Bích articulated:

> In terms of the younger generation, I want to teach my own child not to be greedy for money. Just to live a simple life. I can't be by his side right now to teach him. It's important to teach the younger generation not to do all these wrong things.

By categorically perceiving me as belonging to the younger generation of Vietnamese, I was, in a sense, regarded as non-threatening. At the same time, my relatively young age had also re-cast me to the status of 'outsider' because, in the participants' eyes, I am afforded many opportunities not available to them:

> The younger generation, like yourself, are educated and able to find employment. You are able to have a stable life… When you write your thesis, you must really understand this point. (Kim)

As the above quote illustrates, although my cultural background had granted me insider access to the participants' worlds, there were other aspects of my life, such as my education, that differentiated me from the participants. However, because the majority of the research interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, my status as a postgraduate student was quickly 'offset' (Ho, 2006: 53) by my less-than-perfect command of the Vietnamese language. There were many times when participants would correct my Vietnamese or explain particular terms that were beyond my understanding. Such scenarios automatically re-situated them in a position of authority. Furthermore, my lack of knowledge in relation to the world of drug trafficking, and the pathways into it, also shifted the balance of power towards the participants.

4.3.2 Locating the women

At the time of data collection, between November 2010 and April 2011, I was able to recruit 35 of the 43 Vietnamese women who were in custody for drug-related offences. In recruiting the women to this study, I did not restrict the eligibility criteria to 'Việt Nam-born' women; the sample also includes women who were born outside Việt Nam but identified themselves as coming from a Vietnamese cultural background. I depended on the Vietnamese MLO to provide me with a list of potential participants, and it was only through his assistance that I was able to recruit Vietnamese women prisoners who fell outside the prison's category of 'Việt Nam-born', which is the only measure the prison uses for the identification of Vietnamese prisoners.

On first contact with each potential research participant, I represented myself as a postgraduate student from Swinburne University, who was currently conducting a thesis project on the circumstances surrounding Vietnamese women's involvement in the illicit drug trade. I also made it clear that I was independent from the prison, and not connected to the police, the law or any other member of the Department of Justice. The main purpose of this first contact was to explain in detail the objectives of my research, the process through which I would be collecting the data and what would happen with the data. Potential participants were also told that participation was voluntary, and with their consent, I would be using a tape-recorder during the interviews. It was also important to let them know that if at any time they wanted to terminate the interview, they were free to do so without any repercussions. If they agreed to participate in the research, we then arranged a suitable time to meet for the interview at a later date. Unless the participant requested that the interview be conducted immediately, I always allowed at least a few days between recruitment and interviewing to give participants the freedom to change their minds. Fortunately, this did not happen. At the commencement of each interview, I would carefully explain the research again, and asked for their verbal consent. In order to develop a better sense of who the participants are as a group, what follows is a more detailed description of the participants' demographic characteristics.

Participants included 26 Vietnamese-Australians and nine Vietnamese nationals. Their ages ranged from 20 to 59, with a median of 42. Thirty-two participants were born in Việt Nam and three in Australia or *en route*. Participants came to Australia through the Refugee Resettlement Plan (14), Family Reunion Program (8), Tourist or Migrant Working visa (7), Student visa (3) or Marriage visa (2). For Vietnamese-Australians, the median time in Australia was 25 years; for Vietnamese nationals it was four years. Most participants had some secondary school education while six had only primary school education. Almost half of the participants (16) were separated or divorced at the time of interview, including three whose marriages broke down following incarceration. Of the remaining participants, ten were married or in de facto relationships (six and four respectively), seven were single and unmarried; and two did not identify their relationship status. Of the 26 Vietnamese-Australian participants, nearly all (22) were receiving government unemployment benefits at the time of incarceration. All but one

of the 35 participants described working in 'cash in hand' jobs in the informal economy prior to their involvement in the illicit drug trade.

Twenty participants were incarcerated for involvement in heroin trafficking and 15 for cannabis cultivation. Of the 26 Vietnamese-Australians, 20 were incarcerated for heroin trafficking, and six for cannabis cultivation. All nine Vietnamese nationals were imprisoned for cannabis cultivation. For most participants (30), this was their first offence. The maximum custodial sentence for participants incarcerated for heroin trafficking ranged from four months to 11 years with a median of 25 months. For participants imprisoned for cannabis cultivation, it ranged from eight months to three years with a median of 18 months.

4.3.3 Collecting narratives

In order to understand how participants 'make sense' (Riessman, 1993: 5) of their involvement in drug trafficking, the present research adopted a reflexive and semi-structured approach to interviewing. Doing so facilitated a natural conversational style as opposed to the typical format of a dyadic interview in which the interviewer asks a question and the interviewee simply answers them (Ellis & Berger, 2003). A narrative inquiry into the lived experiences surrounding Vietnamese women's involvement in drug trafficking was a 'suitable' methodological choice as it not only allows us to 'understand how people experience their position in relation to culture' but 'the richness of the narrative [also] helps us to understand how [people] understand themselves, their strategies for living and how they make theoretical sense of their lives' (Etherington, 2004: 75).

In collecting narratives about participants' pathways into, and experiences within the illicit drug trade, it was important that the structure of the interview '[gave] prominence to human agency' (Riessman, 1993: 5) by allowing participants to direct the flow of conversation. At the same time, I needed to be mindful of the fact that not all participants are comfortable with talking freely about their experience. As one participant, Dông, expressed, 'it's easier if you just ask me a question then I will answer it'. In such instances, I would often use probes such as 'can you tell me a little bit more about...' in order to elicit further information. By probing about specific events or

anecdotes discussed by the participant, I was able to 'stay close to the [participant's] experience [and perspective]' (Neuman, 2003: 391). More generally, the 'style and pace' (Ho, 2006: 59) of the interviews reflected participants' temperament and comfort level because as researchers, 'we must not impose additional burdens or expectations on the women we research' (Maher, 1997: 231).

With the exception of two interviews, which were conducted at Tarrengower Prison, all interviews were conducted at DPFC, in a small private interview room located in the program building. When possible, I always made the effort to greet the participants in the reception area and personally accompanied them to the interview room rather than have a prison officer escort them. Doing so allowed me to set an informal tone from the outset of the interview. Although all participants consented to being tape-recorded during the recruitment phase, it was important to ask for their consent again at the beginning of the interview session in case they had changed their minds. This was the case for two participants, who upon seeing the tape-recorder, said that they were uncomfortable with the knowledge that their voices would be recorded. In these instances, I resorted to note-taking, which proved to be difficult and frustrating at times because I was unable to capture all that was said in the interview – mostly because I did not want to disrupt the flow of conversation by constantly jotting down notes. While I did my best to recollect participants' narratives immediately following the interviews, the fact that both interviews were conducted in Vietnamese made the task of recalling quotes verbatim more difficult.

While the overall style of the interviews encouraged, for the most part, unstructured talking, I did open the interviews with a few prepared questions concerning participants' demographic background including their age, country of birth, education status and employment history. Commencing the interviews in this way not only provided an important window into the broader context of participants' lives (Maher, 1997), but it also served as an opportunity to further establish and maintain rapport with participants before getting into the sensitive topic of drug trafficking. It was also during these conversations about participants' life histories that I chose to share stories about my parents' migration journey and my own personal experience of being a second-generation Vietnamese in Australia. Disclosing personal information about myself was not, in Ellis and Berger's words, a mere 'tactic to encourage the respondent to open up'

but rather, it was driven by a 'reciprocal desire to disclose, given the intimacy of details being shared by the [participant]' (2003: 163).

As the majority of participants were born in Việt Nam, and lived there until early adulthood, a great deal of time was devoted to talking about what it was like growing up in Việt Nam. For some participants, this brought back memories of a 'happy [*hạnh phúc*]' and 'stable [*ổn định*]' life. For others, their former life in Việt Nam was plagued by 'extreme difficulties [*cực khổ*]' in which daily struggles to make ends meet were common experiences. Participants' narratives about life in Việt Nam usually flowed seamlessly into long stories about the reasons that brought them to Australia, and the subsequent experiences of resettlement. If participants were comfortable to talk without any guidance or probing on my part, then I allowed them to 'take the floor' (Riessman, 1993: 56), as it was important to understand from their perspective, the circumstances that they considered to be significant in shaping their involvement in drug trafficking. Participants occasionally checked the relevance of what they were saying, whereupon I would provide them reassurance. For example, Kim asked: 'The way I'm telling my story, it's not too confusing and overlapping is it? Do I have to recount my story from the beginning?'

From the first interview, I was alerted to participants' shame and embarrassment about their involvement in the drug trade. Throughout the course of the interviews, not one participant explicitly referred to the terms 'drugs', 'heroin', 'cannabis' or 'drug trafficking'. Instead, participants used euphemisms such as 'the stuff [*đồ ấy*]', 'merchandise [*hàng*]' or 'this pathway [*con đường này*]'. In my first interview, when I directly asked Dông how she came to be involved in 'drug trafficking [*buôn bán ma túy*]', I was immediately met with a display of uneasiness. After a moment of silence, Dông responded by replacing the term 'drug trafficking' with 'this pathway'. The only time participants explicitly used the terms 'heroin' or 'cannabis' was when I asked them what type of drug market they were involved in. A crucial part of reflexive interviewing is to be aware and sensitive to the subtleties and nuances in the language used by participants in order to avoid any misunderstanding. Following this first encounter, I learnt to adapt and employ the 'terminology and concepts' (Neuman, 2003: 449) of the participants, particularly when I needed to probe them about the specific topic of drug trafficking.

In probing participants about their involvement in the illicit drug trade, it was imperative that the questions be framed in a way that was non-judgemental. In most cases, participants were quite receptive to being probed about their time in the drug trade, with some participants emphasising that, ‘if you want to ask me something, don’t hesitate. Just ask me’. In fact, many participants willingly spoke to me at length about their specific roles in the drug trade, the money earned from such roles and the nature of social relations within drug networks. In the few cases where participants were not comfortable with me probing them, they made this clear by providing short and prompt answers or in the case of Huệ, she directly said, ‘let’s not talk about that’. In these instances, I did not proceed to probe them about the issue at hand as I did not want to cause participants further discomfort and stress.

The use of probes was extremely helpful in eliciting accounts that went beyond standard ‘drug trafficking stories’ (Campbell, 2005: 328). Martin and Stenner emphasise that personal accounts of drug involvement are ‘constructed and constructive’ (2004: 403) and according to Campbell, ‘drug trafficking stories tend to follow basic storylines or plots’ (2005: 328). Relatedly, Presser argues that orienting a narrative toward a plot not only provides an explanatory framework for the offending behaviour but it also allows offenders to ‘forge a sense of coherence that experience lacks’ (2009: 179-80). The stories presented in this thesis also followed a ‘basic storyline’, which was chiefly presented through the lens of victimisation. By drawing attention to their marginalised position within the broader social structure, as well as their desperate personal circumstances, it was clear that participants sought to present a moral self that countered the stigmatised image of the ‘evil’ drug trafficker. Participants emphasised that they are morally good people, who had never committed any crime prior to their involvement in drug trafficking. Statements such as ‘this is the first time I have done anything wrong like this’ were consistently reiterated throughout the interviews. As Hồng articulated:

> I’ve never done anything wrong… I knew I did this because I had lost control of my life… With other people, they continue to work as a dealer and sell because they don’t have a conscience; they only see money. When I was imprisoned, I knew that I had committed a crime in the eyes of the Australian government. I know that I did the wrong thing but it’s not the case where everyone who goes to prison is evil.

There was also convergence in the way participants structured their stories, which were generally told in chronological order, with a beginning, middle and end. Stories usually began with a detailed description of the pain and suffering participants had encountered in their lives. Most participants frequently used the Vietnamese phrase ‘fed up with life [*chán đời*]’ to describe their state of mind during such difficult periods. The ‘middle’ addressed the immediate events that culminated in their drug trafficking, how they became connected to the drug trade, and the experiences of working in the drug trade. Narratives usually concluded with accounts of their arrest and imprisonment, framed within the context of redemption. It must also be acknowledged that my own shared ethnic and cultural ties with the women participants may influence how they structure their narratives insofar as they may ‘downplay’ certain aspects of their drug trafficking experiences to avoid feelings of shame. Specifically, there is a possibility that participants may tailor their narratives in accordance with a cultural script, and thus, tell me what they think *I* want to hear. Garland and colleagues recognise this issue and observe that ‘the question of whether minority ethnic researchers are best placed to understand the lived experiences of minority ethnic communities has been repeatedly raised by social scientists’ (2006: 431). Echoing the feminist tradition’s call for reflexivity over the research process, I have explicitly located myself in relation to the present research so that my ‘values and characteristics are made visible’ (Garland et al., 2006: 432).

The manner in which participants presented their narratives is, to a lesser or greater extent, a ‘storied’ (Etherington, 2004: 180) version that is usually produced within the context of the judicial system. As Presser puts it:

> Offenders are [consistently] called upon to explain themselves and thereby reconcile multiple selves – usually, the bad person they were with the good and responsible agent they must now be. (2009: 180)

Most interviews were about 90 minutes; the longest was three hours and the shortest was 20 minutes. This allowed me enough time to probe participants further about issues previously discussed in the interview. In the process, I noticed that some participants took this opportunity to speak about other aspects of their involvement in the drug trade that would have otherwise been strategically omitted in the public narrative. For example, some participants touched on the theme of greed, explaining that while they

had initially worked in the drug trade in response to a financial debt crisis, they became attracted to the large sum of money that drug trafficking generates:

> Because I was making a lot of money, I was greedy and didn't want to stop. There were times when I did want to stop but if I left, where would I get the money to continue to live like this? I found that it was such an easy way to make money so I continued doing it. (Ai)

Participants also spoke of the pride and enjoyment they felt in being able to support their families in both Việt Nam and Australia as a result of their drug trafficking. Kim, for example, explained:

> I was addicted to the money and why was I addicted to the money? I wanted money so that I could help people who are poor in Việt Nam. I have a large family in Việt Nam and they are living in poverty.

It was only through probing participants that I was able to elicit information about the connected motives and justifications associated with their involvement in the drug trade. As the interviews unfolded, I also noticed contradictions in participants' stories. This mostly occurred when participants were probed about their perceptions of the risks and consequences associated with their respective roles in the drug trade. For example, Dông initially stated:

> At the time, I didn't think about the consequences, that I would end up in prison or that I was harming people's lives. I didn't think about any of that.

However, later in the interview, she contradicted this last statement in saying:

> At one stage, I did think about it. I did think about it for a long time because I had never been involved in anything like this before so I was really afraid. I was really afraid so I did spend a lot of time thinking about the consequences before stepping foot into this trade.

Echoing Liebling's observations, the contradictions identified in this study were 'relatively infrequent' (1999: 158). It is also important to acknowledge how 'emotionally turbulent' (Liebling, 1999: 150) the interviews were at times, for both the participant and myself. The interviews were long enough for participants to cover a wide range of issues that were significant to them, including the difficulties associated

with resettlement, experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, gambling-related issues, family crises and the circumstances surrounding their involvement in drug trafficking. They also spoke at length about the pain they felt as a result of being far from their children and loved ones since being in prison, and in some cases, how their imprisonment had resulted in the breakdown of their marriage. In sharing their stories, participants articulated a range of emotions, from anger, pain and sadness to feelings of hope about their future. There were times when I emerged from the interviews emotionally exhausted but it was always made worthwhile when participants expressed their gratitude to me, thanking me for taking the time to listen to their stories, even though it was I who was more grateful for their time and stories. In commenting about the emotional experience that underpins studies of this nature, Bosworth and colleagues contend that, 'by acknowledging and feeling these emotions, both sides validate their humanity' (Bosworth et al., 2005: 259).

4.3.4 Data analysis: Turning narratives into evidence

The final data set comprised of 35 in-depth interview transcripts about the circumstances surrounding Vietnamese women's involvement in Australia's illicit drug trade. The data were analysed according to the principles of narrative analysis, of which 'there is no single method but a broad spectrum of approaches to text that take narrative form' (Riessman, 1993: 25). Informing my own narrative analysis is Riessman's (1993) view that as researchers, we must respect the format in which individuals construct their narratives as it provides valuable insight into how they make sense of their experiences.

In order to remain as close as possible to participants' meanings, as well as 'preserve its original oral character' (Maher, 1997: 225), the first crucial stage of data analysis was to personally transcribe all of the interviews verbatim and in the language or languages in which they were conducted. Of the 35 interviews, 29 were conducted in Vietnamese, three in English alone and three in both languages. Listening to, and transcribing the tape recordings was a lengthy and time-consuming process. As Vietnamese is my second language, transcribing the Vietnamese interviews was challenging because I was sometimes met with words or phrases that were beyond my comprehension. This is one reason why I deliberately chose to transcribe the interviews in Vietnamese rather than directly translate them into English: I was able to refer sections of the text to a bilingual

Vietnamese speaker, who was enormously helpful in clarifying the meanings and translations of certain words and phrases. I also feared that if I immediately translated the Vietnamese interviews into English at the transcription phase, I might have, in the process, lost important nuances and cues, or worse, misinterpreted what participants were saying.

Rather than following a linear, straightforward path, data analysis was iterative throughout the research process and conducted simultaneously with data collection and final write up. Short summaries were compiled immediately following each interview in order to ascertain an early overview of trends and issues emerging from the data. These summaries predominantly focused on 'factual' (Maher, 1997: 227) data related to participants' drug offending such as the type of drug market participants were involved in and subsequently arrested for; what roles they occupied in the drug trade; and the length of sentence served at the point of interview. Summaries also included participants' demographic details including their age, country of birth, migration pattern to Australia, education and marital status.

All interviews were transcribed from cassette tapes into word processing files, with each interview transcript assigned a separate word file. Individual transcripts were then printed out and read multiple times. During this process, sections of the narrative were highlighted and a rough coding scheme was developed according to themes and sub-themes, such as 'motives for working in the drug trade' and 'pathways into the drug trade'. These themes were then annotated in the margins of the interview transcripts. As well as reading for content, it was also important to explore the overall structure of the narrative and ask 'why was the story told that way?' (Riessman, 1993: 2).

The next stage involved analysing and comparing the individual transcripts, and grouping together narratives that have similar 'plots' and themes, identifying points of congruity and incongruity. During this early phase of data analysis, it was common to have some narrative sections fall under multiple themes. Extracts (in the form of narrative texts) from individual narratives, marked with participant identifiers, were then transferred to one or more thematic word files. In the same way that individual transcripts were analysed, each thematic file was printed out and read multiple times in order to identify sub-themes and relationships between themes, or to merge similar themes together.

In keeping with Riessman's framework, it was imperative that the 'sequence and structural features that characterise narrative accounts' were 'not fractured' (1993: 3) during the process of analysing the data. To avoid 'taking snippets of a response edited out of context' (1993: 3), themes were assigned to whole sections of texts that take the form of narratives within individual transcripts. Sections of narratives would then be extracted to thematic word files in their entirety to avoid losing the context and structure of participants' responses.

As this thesis is chiefly concerned with how participants construct and make sense of their involvement in the drug trade, I aimed to 'preserve' and 'respect' (Riessman, 1993: 4) the integrity of the original narratives as much as possible by presenting the research findings in the same chronological sequence as told by participants. Participants' original words are also used extensively throughout the presentation of the research findings in order to adequately represent their 'lived experiences' as well as provide a better understanding of the social and cultural framework from which they tell their stories.

4.3.5 Lies, deception and cultural silences

While issues relating to the validity and authenticity of data are paramount across all types of research, such issues become even more pronounced when imprisoned populations are the subjects of inquiry. According to Bosworth and colleagues, research with prisoners often invokes questions that are inherently interrogative, such as, 'are their answers to be trusted?' or 'were they perhaps less forthcoming about their replies?' (2005: 258). However, as Alvesson reminds us, in the context of any interview, and with any population:

> … despite the interviewer's intensive efforts and possible success in getting the interviewee to be authentic, it is still not necessarily the 'true self' that will emerge, but what may be seen as an effort to construct a valued, coherent self-image. (2011: 86)

In a related argument, Lincoln stresses that any text produced during qualitative research is 'always partial and incomplete; socially, culturally, historically, racially and sexually located; and can therefore never represent any truth' (1995: 280). In this sense, there is no evidence to suggest that prisoners lie, or provide misleading information to a

greater extent than anyone else (Maher, 1997). In instances when individuals do tell lies, or omit certain information in the research context, Riessman raises the question, 'Are not omissions also important?' (1993: 65). Similarly, Maher emphasises that 'lies' or 'partial truths' told by participants, which she refers to as 'cultural silences', are 'at a minimum revealing and, in some instances, critical to both understanding and writing about particular cultures' (1997: 223).

In the context of my own research, I later learnt through informal sources that three of the 35 participants had in fact, provided misleading information regarding the immediate circumstances surrounding their involvement in the illicit drug trade. Being 'fed up with life [*chán đời*]' was repetitively used as both a motive and justification for their offending. When I probed them further to explain what they meant by that, all three participants embedded their explanations within long stories about various economic and family hardships they had endured over the years. In speaking about how they became involved in drug trafficking, participants were less forthcoming, vague and unconvincing in parts. For example, two of the participants presented parallel stories – both were approached by strangers with an offer of mule-work whilst having lunch in a busy Vietnamese marketplace in Việt Nam. The participants framed their offending as uncharacteristic gullibility on their own part, only saying that, 'I don't know what happened. I just listened to the person.' It was even suggested that, 'perhaps my drink was spiked'.

In the weeks and months following these interviews, I inadvertently found out through ad hoc informal conversations that all three participants were heavily involved in gambling prior to working in the drug trade. As discussed earlier in the chapter, one of these participants was the mother of an acquaintance of mine. It just so happened that one night, I was having dinner with a mutual friend of ours, when the topic of my research came up. When I explained that the research was taking place at the women's prison, he said, 'Oh, did you know Trang's [8] mum's in prison. She got done for bringing heroin over from Việt Nam. She was a gambler you know and got caught up with the wrong people'. What I did not understand at the time was why these women hid their gambling during our conversations. For other participants who cited gambling-related debts as the key reason for their involvement in trafficking, they were always quick to

[8] Not her real name

point this out early in the interview; attributing their offending to gambling distinguished them from ‘other’ drug traffickers. In the case of these three participants, I can only assume that their silence is a reflection of the shame and embarrassment they felt about their gambling behaviour. It was clear that they already felt stigmatised by being labelled a ‘convicted drug trafficker’ – and by asking them to participate in my research, I had also implicitly positioned them as such. In choosing not to reveal their gambling, they may have purposely tried to avoid exposing themselves to the double stigma of being a gambler *and* a drug trafficker. Alternatively, they possibly feared the consequences of retelling this aspect of their stories.

This does raise the question of whether other participants in the present study were ‘culturally silent’ about their gambling or other aspects of their involvement in drug trafficking. This is one of the limitations of conducting one-off interviews, in that, compared to ethnographic or longitudinal studies, one-off interviews do not allow time to probe participants about certain silences. Nonetheless, participants’ reluctance to disclose certain information did not preclude them from being forthcoming about other issues. Echoing Liebling’s experience of interviewing prisoners, I found that, overall, participants were ‘painfully honest’ (1999: 158) in talking about many aspects of their lives, including the circumstances surrounding their drug trafficking. In many cases, being ‘caught’ meant that participants were more willing to be open. As Ai puts it, ‘I’m already in here. There’s nothing else for me to hide’.

Conclusion

By recounting the research process in detail, this chapter aims to redress the lack of methodological transparency that often plagues illicit drugs research worldwide. Researching the sensitive issue of drug trafficking, particularly against the backdrop of the prison setting, was never going to be an easy terrain to navigate. As Maher fittingly points out, ‘ethnography is a messy business’ (1997: 232), and even more so in the context of seeking to understand the circumstances surrounding Vietnamese women’s involvement in drug trafficking. However, by being open and transparent about my own research journey, I hope to enhance the integrity of the findings and outcomes of the research.

CHAPTER FIVE
Stories of trauma and dislocation

This chapter aims to provide the necessary context from which we can begin to unpack the complex factors surrounding Vietnamese women's involvement in the illicit drug trade. The women in this study offered a diverse range of reasons and circumstances that propelled them into drug trafficking, which adds further weight to Denton's (2001) observation that there is no single model of why and how women start working in the drug trade. While it was expected that each woman's account would be marked by their own personal nuances and differences, the common thread holding each of these individual narratives together is the cultural framework from which the women told their stories. Guided by Bourgois' argument that 'the lives of drug traffickers cannot be understood within a historical and socio-cultural vacuum' (2003: 48), this chapter provides an introduction to the women who participated in the present research, in terms of who they are as individuals and as part of a larger group of Vietnamese women in Australia.

5.1 The context of Vietnamese migration to Australia

The 35 women in this study represent a diverse cross-section of Vietnamese migrants in Australia: from the early arrivals of refugees, family reunion and marriage migrants to the most recent wave of international students and people arriving on skilled migration or tourist visas. The circumstances surrounding participants' arrival and resettlement in Australia were typically viewed as a critical starting point from which to discuss the journey that led them along the drugs pathway. For many participants, this was a period that marked a series of strains and hardships that have since defined their lives in Australia. Commencing their narratives from this standpoint also allowed participants to frame their involvement in the illicit drug trade through the lens of trauma and dislocation.

Regardless of the migration pathway that participants took in coming to Australia, most typically commenced their narratives with a description of the 'strenuous and difficult'

conditions and circumstances that shaped their lives in Việt Nam. Particularly in the case of participants who came from poor rural backgrounds, most emphasised that they did not have the privilege of completing their education because, as Huệ puts it, 'I had to help out my family in order to live.' Similarly, Kim reported 'I only studied up to grade five.' She elaborated:

> From a young age, when I was eight years old, I had to go to the market and sell things, like fruits and things like that to find money. At the time, there were close to 20 people living under the one roof and from eight years old, I had to start cooking for the whole family. It was a large family and I had to carry the little ones and take care of them the whole day.

During the period of political and economic turbulence that followed the reunification of Việt Nam, almost half of the participants in this study escaped Việt Nam as boat people (either with their families or on their own). Participants believed that by fleeing Việt Nam, they could forge a brighter future for themselves and their families:

> Life was so miserable. There were many times when there was nothing to eat, nothing to wear and that's why I had to escape the country. I saw that other people were leaving so I quickly followed them in order to leave behind such miserable circumstances in Việt Nam. (Ai)

> There were people escaping to other countries and I didn't have any benefit of remaining in Việt Nam because I didn't have an education and I also came from a very poor background. My family worked in fishing, catching prawns and things like that. I only studied up to grade six. That's why I chose to leave so that later on, I could help my family. (Dông)

Participants were detained in South East Asian refugee camps for one to two years before being allowed entry into Australia. Linh, who was only six years old when she fled Việt Nam with her family, recalled how the conditions of the refugee camp were 'just terrible'. Several participants described how the pain of being separated from, or losing a loved one during the escape journey, quickly overshadowed their feelings of hope for the future. Two participants, for example, sadly recounted with great pain and emotion how their husbands had died during their time in the refugee camps.

For family members who had remained in Việt Nam, they were often left with the uncertainty of whether or not their loved ones had survived the perilous boat journey. Ngọc, who migrated to Australia through the Family Reunion Program, explained 'we were so poor and that's why my mother and eldest brother escaped Việt Nam'. Ngọc, who was 11 years old at the time, recalled fearing the worst when there were no news from her mother and brother a year following their escape: 'we thought they had perished at sea or were killed by pirates'.

Not everyone was successful in their escape attempts from Việt Nam, as illustrated by two of the participants in this study. Sương, a Vietnamese national, was the only member in her family who was captured by the '*Việt Cộng*' whilst *en route* to the boat that would take them out to sea:

> In 1981, my family escaped Việt Nam by sea. My family was able to escape but I didn't make it and was left behind because I was pregnant. At the time we had to hide and escape because if the Việt Cộng caught us, then we'd be sent to prison. I got caught with my two nieces and nephews… My family was able to escape but the Việt Cộng captured me and I was sent to prison [How long were you in prison?] I was there until I was almost due to give birth. When I was almost due, they released me. My whole family left and I was the only one who was left behind.

While Sương's parents and siblings resettled in Australia, her husband migrated to Europe. Sương believed that once her husband had established himself in his new host country, he would sponsor Sương, along with their newborn child to Europe. However, she discovered years later that he had started a new family and never heard from him again. Echoing a similar experience to Sương, Tuyền also tried to escape Việt Nam but 'both times I tried to escape, my boat sank at sea'. Tuyền reminisced:

> I dropped out of school in year seven because there was no one in the family to help out my mother. When my mother passed away, my youngest sibling was only three years old so in the end, I had to work in the rice fields and take care of my younger siblings. My father worked very far away so he only came home once a month. There is nothing really happy about my life. I had always dreamt of living abroad because life in Việt Nam was so difficult. Both times I tried to escape, my boat sank at sea. We had someone pull us to shore both times. If no one had pulled us to shore, I would have died at sea. So we were lucky that the fishermen rescued us, and that we were still close to

> the shore. The first time, the boat was still in Việt Nam waters but the second time, the boat was in Chinese waters, near Macau… I had to find my own way back to Việt Nam and ended up begging people for food and money during the journey.

More than two decades following their failed escape attempts, both Sương and Tuyền eventually left Việt Nam and came to Australia on visiting visas, as part of the new wave of Vietnamese migration to Australia. To date, not much is known about this group of new migrants beyond the arrival statistics presented by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Of the 35 participants in this study, ten fall under the 'new migrant' category. Similar to other participants in this study, the 'new migrants' typically described their lives in Việt Nam as 'extremely poor [*quá nghèo*]'. Participants who came to Australia on tourist or working visas professed that one of the core reasons for coming to Australia was to earn enough money to take back to their families in Việt Nam:

> I came here on a tourist visa on my own. I heard from many people that Australia is a big country with vast land and everything over here is civilised. My visa was only for three months and then I extended it for another three months. I then overstayed my visa. It's because of my family circumstances in Việt Nam that I decided to stay here [Do you have children?] Yes. I stayed here and worked so I could bring back some money to Việt Nam. (Bình)

> I came here on a tourist visa. I was only allowed to stay for three months but ended up staying for four years [Did you know anyone when you came here?] No. When I first arrived, I felt pretty sad… I was working on a farm and it was really difficult. But I just had to deal with it [Did you have the intention to work when you arrived in Australia?] Yes, everyone who comes here has that intention. I worked in all different types of jobs but mostly on farms picking fruits. If there were any jobs available than I would do it. (Châu)

The international students in this study insisted that their parents could barely afford to send them to study abroad. They explained that their parents worked hard to come up with the money to pay for their first year of education in Australia but after that, they were expected to work in order to continue funding their education and living expenses:

> When I arrived here, I faced great financial difficulties. Before I came to Australia, life was quite easy because my parents had always taken care of me. So I thought that in

coming to Australia, life would be just as easy. But it was difficult and I got fed up with everything. I wanted to go home but I also wanted to continue studying. I didn't want to tell my parents about how I was feeling because they had used all their money to send me over here and I love my parents… I had to help my parents to pay for my own education and I also needed to pay for my own living expenses. (Xuân)

My parents wanted me to come over here to study so that I could have a brighter future. I didn't have any family or friends here. My life was so difficult. I studied five days a week and then on the weekends, I had to work in order to pay for the rent and groceries. For two years it was like this. It was just dragging on and on like this. (Lan)

While many Vietnamese nationals enter Australia on tourist or student visas, their primary reason for being in Australia is economic. Several Vietnamese-Australian participants in this study also shared this observation, including Hiền, who explained:

For Vietnamese citizens coming here, they say that they come here as tourists but honestly speaking, their intention of coming to Australia is to help their poor family in Việt Nam. They want to be in Australia for a period of time, for three months, seven months or a year so that they can earn a sum of money to bring back to Việt Nam to help their families. This also applies to international students too. When they first come here, perhaps they do try and have the intent of studying but when they arrive here, they can't handle the school fees and their families in Việt Nam don't have the capacity to support them so they need to work to support themselves.

Regardless of the context surrounding participants' migration, or the number of years they have spent living in Australia – which ranged from four to over thirty years – they all spoke at great length about the economic hardships that have consistently plagued their lives since arriving in Australia.

5.2 The economic trajectory of Vietnamese lives in Australia

More than a decade ago, Thomas forecasted that if the pattern of high levels of unemployment combined with the low levels of English continues, then 'it is highly probable that an underclass of unskilled and unemployed Vietnamese will develop' (1999: 25). However, as suggested by the participants in this study, it is most likely that such predictions are more applicable to the older population of first-generation

Vietnamese migrants rather than second-generation or Australian-born Vietnamese migrants:

> The younger generation like yourself are educated and able to find employment. You are able to live a stable life, which enables you to have a clear conscience. You feel happy and are not stressed. (Kim)

> It's very difficult for me to find a job and learn English now. But for the younger generation like you and my children, it's easy. You've studied it since you were young but I don't know anything. I don't even recognise words when I read them. (Dông)

In order to understand why the majority of participants in this study continue to present low levels of English proficiency and high levels of unemployment, it is imperative that attention be directed towards the broader structures that shaped these women's lives. Most participants needed to work immediately following their resettlement in order to support their families in both Việt Nam and Australia:

> I worked two jobs… I allowed people to stay with me and I didn't take rent from them but instead, they took care of my children when I was working… I worked part-time from nine in the morning to two in the afternoon, and then my second job at the factory started at 3:30 in the afternoon and I would work up until midnight. It was the late shift. In the beginning, it was so difficult but I had to do it. After two years of working hard, I was able to sponsor my parents and seven siblings to Australia. (Hương)

> When I first arrived here, it was so difficult. I would work 15, 16, 17-hour days. I had to send my children to childcare so that I could work. I was able to save a little money to buy a couple of sewing machines and start sewing from home. I then sponsored my family to come here; my mother and youngest brother. (Hồng)

Echoing the trajectory of many Vietnamese migrants, most participants found work in low-skilled factory jobs – mostly in the garment industry – or fruit picking on farms. The nature of such jobs did not facilitate opportunities from which they could learn English, mostly because they only interacted with Vietnamese people or other migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. Consequently, participants were often confronted with a 'catch-22' situation, because even if they wanted to learn English in order to gain more skilful employment, it was almost impossible to do so, as illustrated by Cảnh:

> I just worked on the farms because I didn't know what else to do. I don't have experience in anything so I just worked on the farm and I can't speak English. I can only understand a little bit. In the beginning when the children were young, I would sew from home. I would sew from home and look after the children at the same time.

While most participants in this study reportedly experienced very limited economic mobility since their arrival in Australia, a small proportion did describe a period of time when they achieved varying degrees of economic success. For example, both Hiền and Hồng proudly recalled how they had founded their own textile businesses in the mid to late 1980s, mostly employing and outsourcing work to Vietnamese garment workers:

> I was sewing from home and then I was able to save a small amount of money – a little over a thousand dollars. Out of the blue, I decided to visit a factory and I spoke to the factory owner. I was honest and said that I would really like to start a small textile business but I didn't have money. The owner told me that the factory had just been constructed. He cut me a deal and told me that I didn't have to pay anything for the first six months! I guess because the factory had just been built and no one had offered to rent the space, the owner gave me a chance… I started approaching large companies like Katies, and tendered contracts from them. I started off very small, and in the end, I had about five to six factories set up. (Hồng)

> I established my own textile business following the birth of my first child. I had the business for 15 years. The business was initially quite small but then it grew very quickly and was quite successful. I imported clothes from overseas but I also sold garments directly to Myers too. (Hiền)

Global economic restructuring from the early 1990s led to the closure of both businesses because, as Hiền explained, 'international companies were coming here and they were too competitive, challenging the prices… and I didn't have enough capacity to run the business anymore'. Echoing Hiền's predicament, Hồng simply stated 'I couldn't keep up with the international companies'. Other participants established their own small ethnic businesses such as restaurants and specialty Asian grocery stores in well-known Vietnamese economic hubs.

Most participants never fully recovered from the structural unemployment that peaked during the 1990s, mostly because of their poor English skills and limited skill set. For example, Mai, who came to Australia as a refugee almost 30 years ago, stressed:

> The majority of us Vietnamese don't have adequate English skills to look for work. As for me, I would like to work full-time and not part-time but I couldn't find any full-time employment. How could I work full-time if I don't have adequate English skills to understand what my boss is telling me? People won't accept me because I can't speak much English. I couldn't find any stable employment.

Of the 26 Vietnamese-Australians in this study, most were dependent upon government income support. Dông, for example, received a little over $250 per week from the government. However, she insisted that, 'money from the government is not enough'. She elaborated:

> Once I've paid the rent, I'm afraid that there's not enough money to pay the bills… and then my children are growing up and go to school, so each year I had to pay a certain amount of money and this and that. I saw that I was struggling so much. I also worked on a farm for a period of time but I still didn't have enough for the family.

As indicated by the *Poverty Lines: Australia report* (2012), the poverty line for unemployed single parents with over three dependent children, inclusive of housing costs, is $769.07 per week. Based on these statistics, Dông, along with many participants in this study, was living under the poverty line. In this context, many participants resorted to finding cash-in-hand jobs within the 'Vietnamese enclave economy' (Coughlan, 1998: 187) as a means to supplement their government payments. One participant, Vân, sought to explain Vietnamese people's involvement in the informal economy in cultural terms, by reasoning:

> You're Vietnamese! You know how we work! We often claim unemployment benefits but work illegally, doing cash-in-hand jobs. But even then, it's hard for you to save enough money to buy anything. You're lucky if you're able to save $1000 - $1500 a month, $20 000 - $30 000 a year.

In fact, it was implicitly understood in all my interviews that working in the informal economy is just a normal feature of Vietnamese life, as indicated by Vân's assertion that, 'You're Vietnamese! You know how we work!' Consistent with Thomas' (1999) study of Vietnamese-Australians in Sydney, many participants in the present research also engaged in, or were acutely aware of the popular Vietnamese informal credit system known as '*chơi hụi*':

> Everyone plays *hụi*. It's a way for us to save and borrow money. Say there are 30 people who play, and this can include family, friends or acquaintances and each person puts in $500 each. So how much is it for 30 people? It's about $15 000 isn't it? Each month, someone gets to borrow that money but you have to repay with interest. (Veronica)

> It's like investment banking. Each month, you can put in a minimum of $200, $500 or even $1000. It just depends on how big the *hụi* is and who is playing. My mother's *hụi* included people who were pretty well-known like shop owners; people with reputations. Each month you invest the money in the *hụi* and you benefit more by resisting borrowing early on because you receive interest from people who borrow before you. (Angela)

Such informal credit systems are particularly beneficial to individuals who do not have enough savings or security bonds to obtain loans through conventional means. However, the fact that these loans are unregulated by the state and not legally sanctioned means that members run the high risk of losing money through funds being stolen. This occurred to several participants in this study, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> We were the organisers of the *hụi*… it was quite large. When people didn't repay their money, we had to take on the responsibility and pay everyone else in the *hụi*. (Liên)

> I was involved in *hụi* but not with family and then the people took off with the money. (Thủy)

One participant admitted that she had actually defaulted on several *hụi* loans because she simply could not afford the repayments. Veronica and her husband had borrowed money from two separate *hụi* at the same time, which totalled $4000 in monthly repayments, including interest. The money was borrowed to start up a business, which failed almost immediately after it started, and consequently, Veronica had no revenue to repay her *hụi* debts. Initially, Veronica and her husband tried to resolve their debts by borrowing more money from other *hụi* syndicates but things quickly spiralled out of control. In the following excerpt, Veronica described how she and her husband eventually had to 'go into hiding' to avoid retribution from the *hụi* lenders:

> We owed so much *hụi* and it became like six of them; six *hụi* altogether and people were chasing us and we didn't have any money and we were broke and we didn't want to go home because every time we went home, there were people at the front door

> waiting for us… The people from the *hụi* were looking for us, and they would get other people to look for us too. We just lived in a scary world and we couldn't go anywhere. We left our children with our family and we were just wandering around and I was trying to find a way to survive and pay our debt. My husband and I didn't want to go home; we had to run away and just go into hiding.

The *hụi* credit system has clear detrimental economic and social consequences on the Vietnamese community. The frequent cases of people losing their money (or defaulting) through the *hụi* scheme had recently caught the attention of the Australian government because in 2010, the NSW Fair and Trading Minister Virginia Judge, through the media, released a *Hụi banking scheme warning* to members of the Vietnamese community about the risks of losing their money through this form of underground banking (Judge, 2010).

The unregulated nature of the informal economy meant that participants had no legal protection from exploitative wages and poor, unhealthy working conditions nor from any loan transactions made within this realm. However, many had no choice but to participate in the informal economy due to blocked opportunities in the formal sector. In regard to the Vietnamese nationals in this study, their economic activities in Australia were confined to jobs in the informal economy as most were living in Australia unlawfully. These participants commonly worked as fruit-pickers on farms just outside the city of Melbourne. Sương, who had overstayed her visiting visa by several years, insisted that, 'there are plenty of Vietnamese people working on the farms, especially Vietnamese nationals like me'. A major stress associated with living and working in a country illegally is the constant fear of being detected by immigration officers. Sương, for example, described how she and other Vietnamese nationals would often 'sleep in the fields' each time they heard news that 'immigration [officers] were coming to the farms'. Sương recalled:

> It was so difficult. The immigration officers would go to the farms and catch the bosses who hired us. Each time we would hear the news that immigration was coming to the farm, we would all hide. We couldn't return home to sleep. We would sleep in the fields and it was so cold. We would bring our blankets and pillows out to the fields to sleep.

Despite being aware of the fact that farming work entails high risks of immigration detection, one participant, Bình, explained that this is not a deterrence for many

Vietnamese nationals because the advantages of having 'accommodation and food provided for by the bosses' is too attractive an offer to refuse – particularly when many of these individuals are trying to save up as much money as they can to send back to Việt Nam.

Although most participants spoke at great length about their economic trajectory and its impact on their overall life experiences, I became increasingly aware with each interview that issues pertaining to participants' economic circumstances only made up part of the story about why they chose, or were propelled to join the illicit drug trade. It was also equally important for participants to contextualise their narratives against the backdrop of Vietnamese cultural values and beliefs. Regardless of participants' age, most had internalised traditional Vietnamese values, particularly as it relates to traditional gender roles, into the practices of their everyday lives. While the discourse around Vietnamese cultural values and beliefs have been well documented in the context of Vietnamese women's help-seeking behaviour for domestic violence (Bui, 2003) as well as its influence on Vietnamese drug injecting users' vulnerability to blood-borne viruses (Higgs et al., 2008; Ho & Maher, 2008), it has rarely been applied to the context of drug trafficking beyond the world of user-dealers. Exploring the cultural dimension of Vietnamese women's pathways into the illicit drug trade is paramount given that most of the participants' narratives coalesced around what Thomas refers to as the 'leitmotif of Vietnamese cultural life' (1999: 68) – family solidarity.

5.3 In limbo: Living in varied cultural and social worlds

In her observation of Vietnamese families in Australia, Viviani notes that 'loyalty to the family unit among ethnic Vietnamese is much more strongly expressed than it is in current Australian models of the family' (1996: 111). Nguyen further highlights:

> The crux of family loyalty is filial piety, which commands children to honour their parents. One's behaviour, for better or worse, reflects not only oneself but also on the family itself. (1985: 410)

In a context in which the stability of the family unit is valued above all else, Thomas highlights that its disruption often 'exposed individuals to emotional, physical and

social upheavals that permanently affected kin relationships' (1999: 165). In this study, Bích, who along with her mother, was sponsored to Australia by her brothers, described one of the more traumatic experiences arising from conflicts within the family following resettlement. In the following excerpt, Bích recounted how the perceived joy of being reunited with family was quickly quelled by experiences of abandonment, heartache and despair:

> My brother sponsored my mother and me to Australia. When I came here, I didn't know anything at all. Shortly after I arrived here, I saw that life was different compared to life in Việt Nam… My sister-in-law hated both my mother and I. Standing by his wife, my brother kicked both my mother and I out onto the street [You didn't have anywhere to stay?] We didn't have anywhere to stay and I didn't know how things worked here… I had only been here for a few months! My mother was so depressed and she committed suicide. I was so sad and I cried and cried and cried.

In a less acute example, Thủy – who was over 50 years old at the time of interview and one of the eldest participants in this study – described how the Australian way of life was weakening the value and strength of family relationships. Unable to find work due to her age, Thủy spent most of her days at home alone while her adult children were at work. She recalled 'I just remember being so sad and unhappy.' Implicit in her description of the social isolation that marked her day-to-day life in Australia was a clear yearning for how life used to be in Việt Nam, where social and family life was characterised by close-knit communities. Based on Thomas' own study of Vietnamese lives in Australia, the feelings of loneliness and isolation felt by Thủy are considered to be 'extreme difficulties that many older Vietnamese undergo when they migrate to Australia' (Thomas, 1999: 84-5).

Narratives about the value of family collectivism were often juxtaposed with narratives about marital breakdown. Almost half of the participants in this study were separated or divorced at the time of interview. According to these participants, the breakdown of their marriages had a crippling effect in many areas of their lives. What became strikingly clear during participants' accounts of the events surrounding their marital breakdown was the internal struggles they experienced as a result of trying to negotiate traditional patriarchal gender relations in a new social and cultural world that encourages women's agency.

It is well documented that the experiences surrounding resettlement in (mostly) western countries have led to the 'gradual eroding' (Nguyen, 1985: 410) of traditional Vietnamese gender roles, particularly as the new resettlement countries such as Australia encourage greater autonomy and agency on the part of women. Such western notions of womanhood stand in stark contrast to traditional Vietnamese ideologies of gender relations, which dictate the inferior status of women to men in all spheres of life. This patriarchal gender system is based on Confucian principles, and is reinforced in many popular Vietnamese texts, particularly in old proverbs such as: 'One hundred women are not worth a single testicle' (Eisen-Berger cited in Del Buono, 2008: 32). Such traditional patriarchal gender relations are clearly exemplified in the following comment made by Hiền, who met her husband in Australia just a few years after her arrival as a refugee:

> I never moaned or complained to my husband, or started an argument with him… Whenever we would go out with friends, I would always maintain face for my husband. I never got disgruntled with him in front of his friends. If he's showing off in front of them and says something unreasonable to me, I would never pull him up on it or get angry. I understand that he is a man and so I leave him alone. It doesn't matter because I am a woman; I am the wife.

The 'cultural continuity' (Bui, 2003: 231) of such traditional values, in which a woman should 'always maintain face for my husband', is shaped by the Confucian model of 'Three Submissions and Four Virtues' – which is essentially an instruction manual of how Vietnamese women are expected to behave in the personal and public domain. The code of 'three submissions' divides the woman's life into childhood, marriage and widowhood and dictates that a woman must obey three masters in sequence: father, husband and eldest son. The 'four virtues' is a 'list of feminine dos and don'ts' (Marr, 1976: 372), which expects women to be skilful with her hands, remain beautiful, speak correctly and politely, and be of exemplary conduct. Despite adhering to the Vietnamese cultural script of what it means to be a 'good wife', several participants did not understand why their husbands continued to mistreat them so badly. For some participants, domestic violence was a common occurrence in their marriages. This finding is consistent with Bui and Morash's research on Vietnamese-American women. Moreover, these researchers point out that as a result of the importance that Vietnamese people place on preserving the reputation of the family for fear of losing face, 'wife

beating is a private matter [that] often prevents battered women from talking with people outside their families' (1999: 770). This helps explain why some participants, like Hồng, continued to endure their husbands' extreme physical abuse and suffered in silence for many years before mustering up the courage to get a divorce:

> He made me lose a lot of sleep and I couldn't eat. In the meantime, I was creating a business and it was doing so well but I had a husband like that. He never helped. At the same time as working, I had to look after my children too. I have to say, I had to take on the role of mother as well as the father! It's like us Vietnamese, when we first arrive here, we're still young; twenty-something, thirty year olds – the same age as you are now. It's like I just had to endure my husband… He was violent! He used to hit me a lot. Each time he got drunk, he would hit me like he was hitting an enemy. Each time I think about it, I still hate him. He used to hit me until my eyes were bleeding and he would kick me like he was kicking a ball.

Several other participants described how their husbands' infidelity was the catalyst for their marital breakdown. Common to these stories was the revelation that participants' husbands had a second family in Việt Nam:

> My husband did not help me a lot. It was like he wasn't concerned with the family and he would leave to Việt Nam all the time. I was the person who had to support all four children. It was so difficult; we were so deprived. (Dông)

While Dông was reticent to go into detail about her husband's infidelity, participants Hiền and Thương were more willing and open. Hiền recalled that her husband would stay in Việt Nam for at least one year at a time and only return to Australia for two to three months to visit Hiền and their children. Initially, she just thought that he 'liked to go overseas a lot and didn't like to do anything where he was sitting in one place'. She also thought that he was in Việt Nam to scope out new business ventures. In the meantime, Hiền was busy with growing her textile business. Although Hiền's friends had warned her against letting him leave for long periods of time because 'there will be a time when he'll forget his way home', Hiền did not listen to them because she believed that it would be 'rare' for her husband to stray and meet another woman like herself:

> It would be rare for him to find a woman like me who is willing to work and bear as many children as I have; I've given him both sons and daughters. He's not missing

> anything at all. And with my own hands, I make the money. I just don't sit there and do nothing and wait for the money to come.

When Hiền found out about her husband's second family in Việt Nam, he convinced her to go to Việt Nam to meet his mistress and young child in an effort to get Hiền to accept them into the family. Her husband explained that he could not leave his mistress because she was a 'very sweet, gentle person', and to abandon his young family in Việt Nam without any financial support would be 'evil'. Hiền eventually agreed to let her husband sponsor his young family to Australia so that his youngest child can have a future. As time passed, Hiền was unable to pretend that she was fine with sharing her husband with another woman and decided to end her marriage: 'I didn't have anything anymore'.

In Thương's case, and unbeknownst to her, she was her husband's second family:

> He had a wife in Việt Nam… when we both arrived [in Australia] as refugees, we were staying in the same hostel and he fell in love with me. He hid his wife from me. He told me that he didn't have a wife but he actually had a wife and two children back in Việt Nam. At the time, I was just so sad and I was also about to give birth to our first child when I discovered these letters between my husband and his first wife. At the time, he thought that when he left Việt Nam as a refugee, he wouldn't see his wife or children again. That's why he started a family over here.

Like Hiền, Thương finally allowed her husband to sponsor his first wife and children to Australia. She was doing it for the sake of his children in Việt Nam. Despite acquiescing to her husband's request, Thương angrily recounted how he would still go to Việt Nam and 'hook up with this person and that person'. She exclaimed that there are two things she is most afraid of in life: 'a husband who drinks and a husband who cheats; the heavens gave me both!'

Commenting on the issue of infidelity in the Vietnamese community, one participant, Tâm, believes that this is a cultural problem that is more pronounced among the older generation of Việt Nam-born migrants:

> For people who were born and raised here, they have different thinking. But if you were born in Việt Nam and you come here, it's different. The last generation is different to the new generation. Because I was born in Việt Nam and I saw that my mother had to

> share my father with many other women, I thought that when I grew up, I would also have to share my husband and I would have to accept it. But my daughters, they were born in Australia so they don't have to be like me.

The manner in which participants tolerated their husbands' betrayal and abuse reveals how the Confucian legacy of patriarchal gender relations continues to exert a strong influence in shaping participants' responses to family matters. In the same context, some participants spoke of the 'shame and embarrassment' they felt about their marital issues and decided to 'keep it to themselves' for fear that 'they will be laughed at'. As Tuyền highlighted:

> I didn't dare speak about [my marital problems] because I didn't know how people would judge me. I didn't dare speak about it so I kept it inside.

Such behaviours, according to Nguyen, are typical of Vietnamese culture and reflect 'an enduring Buddhist and Confucian pattern of conduct that encourages passiveness and personal reserve' (1985: 410). Furthermore, participants' initial reluctance to divorce their husbands echoes Thomas's observation that 'divorced people are often marginalised in contemporary Vietnamese society' (1999: 67). In the same vein, Kibria further notes that 'marital separation or divorce is a stigma among the Vietnamese in the United States' (1990: 16).

Vietnamese cultural values and beliefs were not the only reasons why participants sought to maintain family solidarity. Social isolation and low human capital were also identified as key influential factors as to why participants were initially reluctant to leave their husbands, as exemplified by the following comment from Hiền:

> On the one hand I was looking after the children and on the other I was concerned with work and up until this point, my hands are empty. I don't have anything at all. I don't have my parents with me and I don't have any siblings so that's why I depended on my husband the most.

The literature on Vietnamese women migrants also suggest that they often remain in abusive or unhappy marriages due to limited economic resources (for example, Bui & Morash, 1999). While no one in the present study explicitly stated this as such, the fact that many of these participants were stay-at-home mothers who had no stable income other than what they received from government income support makes it likely that they

chose to remain in their marriages for 'fear of loss of the economic protection that men provide' (Thomas, 1999: 172).

For many participants, the pain and suffering that arose from the dissolution of their marriages formed a core part of their narratives about the circumstances surrounding their involvement in the illicit drug trade. For example, Tuyền emphasised:

> If you have a happy family life with your husband and children then there would be no reason to be fed up with life… I didn't do anything but [my husband] would create problems and then go out with his mistresses and all he cared about was them and I felt fed up. You feel sad and more likely to do criminal things.

Younger participants in this study highlighted the cultural conflict that often arises from intergenerational differences within migrant families. Rosenthal suggests that 'value discrepancies due to acculturation underlie this conflict' (1996: 82). Additionally, Herz and Gullone observe that in contrast to individualist societies, parenting practices in collectivist societies are 'less strongly characterised by overt displays of affection and acceptance of individuality' (1999: 745). In Thomas's study of Vietnamese-Australian families, she notes that each time 'talk turns to family', she was often quoted the following well known Vietnamese proverb: '*Thương con cho roi cho vọt, ghét con cho ngọt cho bùi*' which translates into English as 'To love a child one is strict, to hate a child one says sweet words' (Thomas, 1999: 76). Consequently, Webber contends that, 'Vietnamese-Australian young people often find themselves straddling two social worlds. At home, parents put pressure on children to work hard and achieve academically, while on the street they are advised to rebel against authority and reject achievement goals' (2002: 18). Consistent with this literature, the younger participants in this study experienced many family conflicts as a result of 'growing up with strict parents.' For example, Khánh, who came to Australia when she was just a toddler, recalled:

> My parents were pretty strict. Education, you know, they were strict and forced me to study and get good grades and all that. That's why I kind of rebelled when I got to high school and I used to wag [truant] and stuff.

The strong emphasis that Vietnamese parents place on their children's education is also exemplified in the following example provided by Veronica, who was sponsored by her father to Australia when she was ten years old:

> There's always a black sheep in the family and that happened to be me in my family. I like to be independent and do things my own way. My parents were very strict. You know our tradition; our parents only ever want us to be doctors or lawyers. I didn't really like to study. All my older brothers and sisters like to study; we are an educated family but I wasn't good at study.

To make matters worse, Veronica fell pregnant at 16 years old and was consequently kicked out of the family home because her pregnancy brought shame to the family:

> My family was very upset. For a boy, they can do whatever they want but for a girl, you have to be home at a certain time and if I didn't go home on time, my dad would hit me... I didn't have that communication with my family, like that close communication, like affection. I was always scared of them… so when I fell pregnant, I was too scared to confront them so I had to run away from home. At 16, I couldn't get an abortion because I had no money. It costed about $200 to get an abortion and if you went to the hospital, you needed your parents' consent. My family reported me as a missing person and after six months, the police found me. When my dad came to pick me up from the police station, and as soon as he saw my big stomach, he turned away. He didn't want anything to do with me. He didn't want to bring me home. He did eventually bring me home and suggested that I get an abortion but I was too far along in my pregnancy. So they arranged a social worker to help me and I had to stay with all these young pregnant girls who were also abandoned by their family. My family didn't want me around because they would lose face in front of my relatives.

It was not until Veronica remarried ten years later and thus became a more 'respectable woman' in her father's eyes did he finally 'let go of the past and was ready to start fresh'.

Veronica and Khánh's 'strict' upbringing contrasted from the experiences described by Vy and Angela, who both grew up in unstable homes where one or both parents were frequently absent. Vy, for example, explained that at eight years old, her mother remarried and started a new family with her step-dad. During this period, Vy described how she 'felt like an outsider' within her own family because 'my mum had her own

separate family'. When she was 11 years old, she went to live with her grandmother and not long after, she 'started going out a lot and met bad friends who used heroin'. Angela, on the other hand, grew up in a single-parent household and described her family as 'really poor'. Angela's father walked out on the family when she was just six years old. She believed that her father took off because he 'owed a lot of money', mostly from *hụi* loans. She recalled how people started coming after her mother for the repayments:

> They'll come around, trying to get us to pay up. In the beginning, they would scratch our windows and then do worse things as time went on. Then, like, ever since I was young, to see my mum like that, it breaks my heart and I've always wanted to do something to support the family… My mum gave these people her key card with her single parent payment on it.

Angela explained that when she was old enough to work, she took on much of the family's responsibilities, as her mother was too depressed to work herself:

> I don't know how we managed to get by. She probably borrowed money from my uncles and aunties. She had my brother when I was ten with another man and she was going through really bad depression at the time, so I had to take on the role of the parent and grew up really quickly… When I was 13 years old, I went knocking on every [Vietnamese garment] factory asking them if I could help out in any way, like cutting threads off of garments. They felt sorry for me 'cos I was carrying my brother so they helped me and let me hang around and just do whatever I could for them you know, bits and pieces around the factory and then when I was 14 years old, I worked in an Asian grocery store bundling up the herbs.

Angela recounted how her mother's friends would admirably tell her that she was a 'good daughter' because she displayed behaviours of filial piety, or as Angela expressed in Vietnamese, '*có hiếu*'. Filial piety is a central Vietnamese family philosophy dictating that children must have a sense of obligation to the family. It is the ultimate act of 'loyalty to the family unit' (Viviani, 1996: 111) and commands the 'prioritisation of obligations to family members above all else, including the self' (Coupland, 2008: 103). Such devotion to the family, as illustrated throughout this chapter, is a theme that is woven throughout the participants' narratives.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to offer an alternative image of the 'drug trafficker' by resituating the analysis within the participants' historical, cultural and socio-economic worlds. This chapter illustrates that the participants in this study are just 'ordinary individuals' (Coomber, 2006: 167) who have undergone enormous strains and hardships in their lives. By no means does this excuse their offending behaviour but it does humanise them, which is particularly important given that drug traffickers continue to be vilified by politicians, the media and the general public as morally depraved, greed-driven individuals.

In presenting the data in this chapter, I am acutely aware that issues of trauma and dislocation are not unique experiences to participants in this study but are common to many Vietnamese migrants in Australia. This includes the traumas of forced migration, experiences of marginalisation and exclusion as a result of socioeconomic disadvantage as well as having family structures disrupted by loss, separation or divorce. Yet only a small proportion of the Vietnamese population in Australia become involved in the illicit drug trade. In this context, it is imperative that analysis also be directed towards an understanding of the immediate circumstances or situational factors surrounding participants' involvement in the illicit drug trade. However, circumstances alone did not facilitate the women's initiation into drug trafficking. As Taylor points out, 'opportunity to participate must be available' (1993: 31), which in this study, was either facilitated by relationships from the participants' own personal and social networks, or through gambling networks at Melbourne's Casino. The following two chapters specifically address the motives and circumstances associated with these two distinct pathways into the illicit drug trade.

CHAPTER SIX
The gambling pathway

The 35 participants in this study identified five distinct categories of motives that drove their involvement in the illicit drug trade. These were gambling debt (15), economic gain (8), non-gambling debt (4), romantic love (4) and drug dependency (3); one participant denied involvement and insisted that she was mistakenly arrested. This chapter focuses on the 15 participants whose pathway into the illicit drug trade was driven by debts incurred through casino gambling. While the identification of gambling as a serious problem among particular subsectors of the Vietnamese-Australian population is not new, the present study's articulation between gambling and the illicit drug trade is a unique finding that has, up until now, been overlooked by the academic domain.

6.1 Making a risky bet: the pathway from gambling to drug trafficking

The participants who took the 'gambling pathway' were disproportionately Vietnamese-Australians rather than Vietnamese nationals. Otherwise, their demographic profile was similar to other participants. Their median age was 44; most were secondary educated; and relied upon government income support and/or work in the informal economy.

The 15 participants who identified gambling debt did so unequivocally. Nguyệt, for example, exclaimed 'If there was no casino, us Vietnamese would not be so miserable!' Moreover, in response to the question of how they ended up in prison, rather than explaining their incarceration in terms of the drug offending for which they were arrested, all 15 participants unanimously claimed that 'it's because I got involved in gambling at the casino [*tại vì cô bị vướng vào con đường cờ bạc ở casino*]'. Further, they distinguished themselves from other drug trafficking offenders by suggesting that gambling had damaged their usual judgement:

> I'm unlucky. If I was selling heroin so that I could buy a nice car or a nice double-storey house, or I bought a nice house for my children, then that would be different. It

> was only for a few thousand dollars gambling debt and now I have to be in prison for a few years. (Thủy)

> Since being in prison, I often think why is it that I only owed $35 000 and now I have to give up a couple years of my life. I now have to be far away from my parents and children. I've never done anything illegal but only now, I had to do something illegal. I don't understand. Why did all this happen to me now? I really respect and abide by the laws here. I've tried to avoid everything in the past but I just couldn't avoid gambling. (Như)

Interestingly, participants themselves remarked on the disproportionate influence of gambling among Vietnamese women prisoners:

> In my view, 80 per cent of women in here, who were involved in drug trafficking, are here because they lost at the casino. (Tuyền)

> In my opinion, most [Vietnamese] women are in here because of gambling. Generally speaking, there is a lot of money to be made in [drug trafficking] but for the majority of people who come in here, their hands are empty. Because whatever money they have, they gamble it away at the casino. It's like they are working for the casino. (Diễm)

Another three participants – whom I referred to in Chapter Three – explained their involvement in the illicit drug trade in terms of economic gain, but provided implausible stories and concealed their gambling histories. There are two possible explanations as to why they remained silent about their gambling: they may have avoided the double stigma of gambling and drug trafficking and/or they may have feared retribution from the drug/gambling networks they were associated with. On this basis, it seems that more than half of the participants (18) found their way into the drug trade through gambling. However, this section can only draw on the narratives of the 15 participants who openly admitted to trafficking or cultivating drugs as a result of impending gambling debts.

6.2 Reasons for gambling

Contrary to recent media reports, not one of the 15 participants gambled on electronic gaming machines in local pubs and clubs. In fact, they did not gamble on any electronic gaming machines at all. They all gambled at Melbourne's casino complex, on table

games such as Black Jack, Baccarat or Poker. Nguyen and Dinh (1998) point out that it is not difficult to understand why the casino is viewed as a pleasant environment for Vietnamese people as it offers them a sense of community, which is highly appealing given that Vietnamese culture is strongly characterised as being community-oriented. It is a place where they can enjoy the company of other Vietnamese people, and 'be entertained without the need for high level of English skills' (Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 1997: 47). In this respect, table casino games are considered to be more conducive to 'meeting new people' and 'having conversations' with other Vietnamese patrons than individually gambling on electronic gaming machines. In this study, participants presented three specific reasons for going to the casino. The first reason was to socialise and escape personal problems at home. The second reason was to make extra money and the third reason was to recover their partner's gambling losses.

6.2.1 The casino as a retreat from personal problems

Almost half of the 15 participants started going to the casino in an effort to escape personal problems they were experiencing at home. The casino was perceived as a temporary retreat, where they could socialise and meet new people, and take their mind off circumstances that, in their words, made them feel 'fed up with life [*chán đời*]'. These circumstances included marital problems, loneliness and bereavement. As highlighted in the previous chapter, a common marital problem cited was the experience of betrayal, brought on by participants' husbands or de factos' infidelity. Tuyền, for example, angrily recalled that her husband 'was playing around and he also had a mistress. I was fed up with life so I went to the casino.' She elaborated:

> I couldn't handle staying in the house all the time so I needed to go socialise outside. Many people go dancing or watch movies to relieve their stress but I don't like doing those things so I went to the casino.

Upholding the Vietnamese custom of keeping family matters private, Tuyền took it upon herself to resolve her personal problems rather than seek outside help. Hồng, on the other hand, couldn't bear to be at home alone following the loss of her son: 'I would just constantly see him walking up and down the house'. The grief was driving her 'crazy' and it was at this low point in her life that she accepted a friend's invitation to

attend the casino. Prior to this, Hồng insisted, 'I had never stepped foot into the casino, even though it had been open for many years already'.

Participants typically perceived the casino as the only socially acceptable place for a Vietnamese woman, especially if she is on her own. Ruminating on the alternative options available for Vietnamese women in Australia, Thủy emphasised:

> Vietnamese women don't like to drink or go to nightclubs… In terms of drinking, have you ever seen a Vietnamese woman drink alcohol? That just doesn't happen… In terms of going to the gym, us Vietnamese women don't go to the gym. Who is going to sweep the house? Who is going to cook? Who is going to sew the clothes? We're only free in the evenings so we go to the casino. That's all there is.

Echoing Thủy's sentiments, Nguyệt exclaimed, 'Think about it, here in Australia, where else can us Vietnamese women go out!' Thủy and Nguyệt's perceptions are perhaps more representative of the experience of older Vietnamese women who are restricted in their capacity to engage in other recreational alternatives due to their limited English skills. What's more, many of the participants who shared this sentiment were less acculturated into Australian culture and society, and held strong traditional views about how a Vietnamese woman should behave and conduct herself.

A final point worth noting about this group of participants is that in speaking about their initial reasons for attending the casino, no one spoke of the desire to gamble. In their view, the casino was regarded as just a social space where they could escape their problems:

> It's [at the casino] that makes you happy and helps you forget about your problems. (Phúc)

Nevertheless, after several visits to the casino, these participants eventually entered the gambling pathway as they were enticed by the money that could be won from one hand of gambling, as illustrated by Tuyền:

> It's because of your circumstances, and you're fed up with life that you go there. If I go to my family or friend's house, they would still need to go to work. They can't hang out with me all the time. The casino is open 24/7 so you're not restricted by time. And you see people winning so you hope that you can win like them, so you have money to pay off debts and buy things.

Unlike the participants in this group, participants in the following two categories declared that the core reason why they started going to the casino was to make money.

6.2.2 Alternative source of income

Making money is an 'obvious' (Nguyen & Dinh, 1998: 2) appealing feature of gambling, and is not unique or specific to any particular cultural group (Scull & Woolcock, 2005). However, for a small proportion of participants, what was distinctive about their narratives was that they did not make money from gambling themselves; rather, they viewed the casino as an opportunity to make money from other gamblers. These participants were known as 'lenders' at the casino, and according to Hương, 'I was earning a lot of money from charging people interest'. Similarly, Kim claimed that, 'I would use my savings or whatever money I had, and lent it to people and make money from the interest repayments'. These women eventually became gamblers themselves in order to recover the losses when their borrowers defaulted on their loans.

Other participants revealed that they had hoped gambling could generate extra income in order to supplement their low wages:

> Look at me, I don't know any English and in one week I was only making $500. On days that you are lucky [at the casino] you can win $400 or $500 so you become greedy, do you understand? (Thảo)

> I was working so hard, sometimes three jobs in one day doing 72- hour weeks. I was working on the farm and selling bread in the bakery. It was really difficult. At first, when I went to the casino, I would play $20, then $50, and then a few hundred and a few thousand. I was making all this extra money and it was me who encouraged my husband to go to the casino and he started playing too. (Vân)

Participants in the next category did not go to the casino with the intention to socialise or meet new people, although this was a welcoming experience. Nor did they view the casino as a place to make extra income. These participants 'jumped onto the gambling pathway [*nhảy vào con đường cờ bạc*]' in a desperate attempt to recover their partners' gambling losses.

6.2.3 Recover partner's gambling losses

Participants in this category insisted that they had no prior knowledge that their husbands or partners were gambling at the casino. The revelation came about when the women noticed that they could no longer meet bill and rent/mortgage repayments, which were all previously manageable:

> My husband had already owed so much from gambling! My husband was too concerned with having fun and I loved my husband and so I jumped into gambling too in order to recover all the money that had been lost. For example, my husband had lost $50 000 so I did what I could to recover that $50 000. (Bích)

> I wasn't aware that he was gambling because every time we would make money, he just, you know, he went gambling. There were a few times when we didn't even manage to pay bills and you know taking care of the kids and all these expenses so umm, I was wondering what was going on and one day he just told me. He said to me that he's been gambling and he hid it from me. He asked me to come along to the casino. So I thought okay, maybe if I get a few thousand dollars, maybe I can play big and maybe win $10 000 or $20 000. (Veronica)

The belief that participants could make money, or recover losses from gambling is strongly tied to the Vietnamese mindset of 'trying to beat the system' (Nguyen & Dinh, 1998: 2). Moreover, despite losing control of their gambling, not one participant in the gambling cohort framed their behaviour as an addiction but rationalised it in terms of 'recovering' or 'chasing my losses [*gỡ lại tiền thua*]', as exemplified in the following comment made by Nguyệt:

> Whatever money I had, I just gambled it all to try and win it back, to win it back and then I would stop playing. But each day, I dug a deeper hole and I couldn't recover the money. But when I was losing, I just couldn't accept it. I just thought, 'I'll just try to recover the money and then I'll stop forever.' But then the days just passed by so quickly and I didn't even notice. It's not that I was addicted to gambling; it's because I was addicted to money. It's the value of the dollar.

Participants' perceptions that they could beat the casino were not entirely based on 'illusions of control-beliefs' (Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010: 34). Many of them had in fact won many hands of gambling previously. It was these narratives about 'winning' rather

than ‘losing’ that provided a deeper insight into understanding why participants firmly believed that they could ‘beat the system’:

> I started winning a few thousand dollars just by playing $5 on the Black Jack. Over a few months, I would win a big amount of money…it was an easy way to make money. (Veronica)

> I was able to recover $50 000! (Bích)

> In the beginning, I was winning! In one day, I would win $1000, $2000 and even $5000. There were times when I won $10 000. After winning all this money, I thought that this was such an easy way to earn money. (Kim)

The commonly shared belief that individuals can eventually beat the system is what makes the practice of lending and borrowing possible among Vietnamese people at the casino. Currently, this form of informal lending as a type of personal service in connection with gambling is overlooked in the academic domain. In the following section, I aim to fill some of this gap by exploring how participants in this study became involved in this type of informal lending and at the same time, offer insights into how such practices operate in the context of the casino.

6.3 ‘Helping each other out [giúp đỡ nhau]’: The practice of lending and borrowing as a form of service at the casino

Most participants described the practice of lending and borrowing in the context of the casino as common practice among Vietnamese men and women. The media often frames informal casino lenders as ‘loan sharks’ and ultimately portrays the relationship between gamblers and ‘loan sharks’ as a one-way relationship that is exclusively initiated and exploited by the latter. For example:

> The investigation by the ABC News Online Investigative Unit found criminal networks are actively recruiting problem gamblers playing poker machines at pubs and clubs, to traffic heroin and cultivate cannabis. Of the more than 600 ethnic Vietnamese drug offenders surveyed, 72 per cent said that they were enticed into the drug trade to pay their gambling debts. (Thompson & Bell, 2011)

> Using a network of loan sharks, [drug syndicates] target individuals with gambling debts, then try to persuade them to carry the drugs to repay the loans. (Silvester, 2009)

Participants did not describe the relationship in these terms. Rather, such relationships were set within the context of 'helping each other out [*giúp đỡ nhau*]'. This was the perspective of both lenders and borrowers in this study.

6.3.1 The borrower's perspective

Most participants described their lenders as 'friends [*bạn bè*]'. In doing so, they highlighted the social embeddedness of the relationship, facilitated through the casino. Although no conclusions can be drawn about the level or nature of these friendships, some participants did specify that such relationships were limited to the context of the casino. Huệ, for example, maintained that 'they were only friends that I knew from the casino; we weren't close'. The relatively small community of regular Vietnamese gamblers at the casino meant that everyone was aware of each other. Kim, for example, observed:

> You're eating and sleeping there[9]…through gossip, you know everyone and everyone knows each other's business.

Many participants formed relationships with other Vietnamese casino patrons whilst gambling at table card games and it was within this context that some participants were offered loans to help recover or chase their losses:

> It's like they are sitting next to you, also gambling. But these people are always gambling at the casino. They gambled next to me and we would have pleasant conversations. I would tell them, 'I've lost so much. Today, I've lost $1000' or whatever amount it was. I was so upset so I borrowed money from them. (Thủy)

> If you were losing, they approach you and start a conversation. They would ask, 'Are you lucky today?' I was losing so I told them everything. I said, 'Oh my God, today I've lost a few thousand dollars. Where am I going to get the money to pay the

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[9] It is unlikely that people were sleeping in the casino gambling venue. I assume that this phrase was most likely used to emphasise the large amount of time regular gamblers spent at the casino gambling. Other participants did state that at their lowest point, they were gambling at the casino 24/7.

> mortgage, where am I going to get the money to pay the bills?' They then said, 'Okay, I have $500 on me. Do you want to borrow it?' (Như)

Being approached by other casino patrons with the offer of a loan was not the only scenario identified. Some participants actively sought loans themselves and in the event that they did not know whom to ask directly, then 'there are people who can introduce you'. In response to my question of, 'How do you know these people lent money to gamblers?' Bích explained:

> It's like people introduce you back and forth like that. For example, you're gambling and you've lost so much already. You start complaining to me about it. You say, 'I've lost so much, can you let me borrow some money?' I then introduce you to someone and all you have to do is repay the loan with interest. You then win a hand at gambling and you break even. You just need to win once.

To further highlight the small network of Vietnamese people at the casino, Nguyệt emphasised:

> When you're losing, and you play [at the casino], you know who to borrow money from. You know! Because you're Vietnamese hanging out with other Vietnamese people so you know! You play there constantly so you're acquainted with people so when you lose, you ask.

It was not the case that participants randomly wandered around the casino soliciting other Vietnamese patrons for loans. Loans occurred in the context of observed behaviour and reputation, including information about character, earnings and debt history:

> They saw that I went to the casino often… they would give me money each time they saw that I was losing. They gave me the money and said, 'just play'. They don't just lend money to anyone. They lent me money once or twice before and I repaid them each time, and they saw that I was reliable so they kept on lending me the money. (Huệ)

> They gave me $1000 because they knew that I was a regular gambler and that I had a job. That's when they give you the money. (Hồng)

> They trusted me so they lent me money. I just borrowed back and forth, back and forth like that. Do you understand? [Why did they trust you?] I was a regular gambler and I often went to the casino and they saw me there constantly. If they see you regularly

gambling, they're not scared. Each time I borrow from them, I repaid them straightaway. And so the next time, they lent me more. (Nguyệt)

Such accounts illustrate how social ties formed through regular contact, combined with the participants' reputation of being reliable borrowers, constituted a level of trust necessary for the exchange of loans to occur. In cases where both parties (that is, lenders and borrowers) did not know each other well, trust was often facilitated by a third party. Social networks based on shared culture and ethnicity also accounted for the development of this type of informal lending among Vietnamese people at the casino. Most obviously, relationships between lenders and the participants were only made possible through the shared language of Vietnamese given that most participants have very low levels of English proficiency. Participants' cultural familiarity with the Vietnamese informal lending practice of *chơi hụi* also helps explain why participants accepted or sought loans of this nature at the casino. Participants typically reported a ten per cent weekly interest rate on top of their loan repayments[10]:

> If you borrow from them, for example, you borrowed $10 000 then in one week, you would have to repay $11 000. (Bích)

> In regard to the interest I had to repay my friend, she gave me one month to repay it. So the $5000 I borrowed will turn to about $7000. They calculate the interest on a weekly basis. (Thủy)

The interest rates reported by participants are phenomenally high; ten per cent weekly interest rates amounts to 520 per cent interest per year. For comparison, the *Consumer Credit Act* allows pawnbrokers to charge no more than four per cent per month, or 48 per cent annually. Despite the exorbitant interest rates associated with loan repayments, most participants understood that this was part of their loan conditions. Furthermore, given the informal nature of these transactions, all terms of agreement were conducted verbally.

This study did not identify any narratives whereby participants were refused loans. This could be attributed to the fact that all participants had been regularly gambling at the

[10] To the best of my knowledge, there are currently no previous studies on loan sharking as a service to gamblers. For this reason, no comparable analysis can be made regarding the interest rate charged.

casino for a substantial period of time and subsequently, had established social ties that were strong enough to facilitate such loans. Thảo, for example, had been gambling at the casino for at least five years and during this time, she was routinely borrowing money from other Vietnamese patrons to fund her gambling behaviour.

6.3.2 The lender's perspective

This study was able to obtain glimpses into the operation of lenders as three of the fifteen participants in the gambling cohort reported that they had acted as casino lenders prior to gambling themselves: two of them used funds from their legitimate businesses, while the other acted as a 'middleperson'. According to these participants, the informal practice of lending and borrowing at the casino serves two main goals: firstly, it is an opportunity to earn money based on the interest received from these loans. For example, Hương insisted that during this period, she only attended the casino to socialise and to lend gamblers money. When probed if she was associated with the illicit drug trade at this time, she said that 'there was no need to get involved in the [illicit drug trade] because I was earning a lot of money from charging people interest'. Kim, on the other hand, was loaning money on her 'boss's'[11] behalf and was thus getting a cut of the interests received:

> I was the middleperson, do you understand? My boss trusted me. You recover money on a weekly basis. If people needed it, then I'd let them borrow it.

Secondly, these three participants understood the action of lending money as providing a service to the gamblers. The reported amount of money lent ranged from $5000 to $20 000 at any one time. Contrary to media reports, all three participants stressed that in lending the money, there was no strategic ploy or motive to lure the gamblers into the illicit drug trade. In fact, two of the participants claimed that the gamblers had 'lured [*bị dụ*]' *them* into lending the money through 'comforting and sweet words':

> It's like they've fallen so deep and they were no longer honest. They [were smooth operators], just so long as they could borrow money from me, that's all. At the time, I didn't have the ability to recognise that and so I would listen to their comforting and

[11] Although Kim was not directly involved in the illicit drug trade during her time of lending money to gamblers, she stated that her 'boss' was associated with the heroin trade.

> sweet words and I believed them, thinking that they were honest. That's the reason why I lent them the money. (Kim)

> The gamblers deceived me in order to get a loan from me. They are all untrustworthy but I was unaware of this because I wasn't a gambler myself. (Hương)

In each case, the borrowers had 'defaulted on their loans [*giựt tiền*]' by 'going into hiding [*bỏ đi trốn*]'. Subsequently, these three participants started gambling themselves in order to recover their losses. This last point further highlights the commonly held perception among participants that one *can* make money from gambling and thus 'recover losses'.

6.3.3 Tipping point

Given the exorbitant interest rates, there was a tipping point where participants could no longer hope to recover their debts through gambling. Debts ranged from $30 000 to more than one million. This tipping point plunged participants into crisis. At the top end, for example, Bích described how she 'sold everything' including her house, whereupon she was left with a debt of $300 000:

> I had to sell everything. I sold everything but I still didn't have enough money to repay people [Can I ask how much you owed?] I owed about $300 000. This was after I had sold all my possessions so I was left with a $300 000 debt… I couldn't borrow from the bank. I redrew from my mortgage and I also had a lot of personal bank loans. After I sold my house, I did all the calculations and I was still left with a $300 000 debt.

On a more modest scale, Tuyền recalled how she 'needed money to pay for my groceries and bills and petrol, so I didn't have any money left to repay the debt quickly'. Participants felt trapped. To make matters worse, the lenders did not accept installments, as exemplified by Nguyệt's assertion that, 'If I gave them $100 or $200 a week, do you think [the lenders] would accept that? Of course not!'

All but one participant described giving up gambling at this point. For example:

> At the time, I had lost so much that I'd stop gambling. I had stopped playing and I returned home to take care of my children but I was in debt of $30 000 - $40 000. (Thảo)

> I didn't continue down the pathway of gambling. I stopped cold turkey. When I had $5000 or $10 000 in my hand, I didn't gamble away one dollar. I stopped just like that. I told myself that I would never gamble again. (Kim)

Yet giving up gambling was no longer enough. Desperate circumstances called for desperate measures. At the same point as participants stepped off the 'gambling pathway', they joined the 'drugs pathway'.

6.4 The pathway from gambling to drug trafficking

While all 15 participants in this chapter were initiated into the drug trade through gambling networks established at Melbourne's casino, they described two distinct entry points. Half of the participants were introduced to the trade by their lenders while the other half insisted that they entered the 'drugs pathway' through 'friends from the casino' other than their lenders. The two distinct entry points had different dynamics. Participants who were introduced through their lenders understood themselves as conscripts, unwillingly drafted through threats and intimidation. They mostly occupied roles at the bottom-end of the drug distribution chain, which in this study included the role of heroin mule (personally transporting heroin from Việt Nam to Australia via air travel) and cannabis crop-sitter. In contrast to conscripts, participants who were *not* introduced to the drug trade by their lenders understood themselves as volunteers, making an active choice to resolve their desperate circumstances. Volunteers adopted diverse roles in the drug distribution chain, which entailed greater control and autonomy. The next section first considers the experiences of the conscripts followed by the volunteers.

6.4.1 Conscripts

Conscripts described how their casino lenders 'forced [*ép*]' them into working in the illicit drug trade through threats and intimidation, echoing the media discourse around 'loan sharks'. Thảo, for example, recalled her fear when lenders 'came to my house banging on the doors and swearing at me, saying all sorts of things.' Similarly, Hồng reported:

> They forced me many times… They kept coming to my house and leaving threatening letters in my letterbox. They said to me, 'if you don't do your math and repay the money, then don't blame me.'

In another example, Như described how her lenders made serious threats against her family as an intimidation tactic to get her to work in the drug trade:

> They knew my background like where my parents were living and which school my son attended… If I didn't repay the debt, then I wouldn't know if I would be able to see my children's faces the next day or if my parents were able to live a trouble-free life.

Yet none of these participants described physical violence or coercion. On the contrary, when I probed them further about the nature of the threat and coercion experienced, most reframed their experience from being 'forced [*ép*]' to being 'asked [*rủ*]'. The common thread was that participants felt a strong sense of obligation to honour their debts and thus believed that they had no choice in the decision. For example:

> If you don't pay off your debt, they force you, they demand it, and they go to your house looking for you. So you have to think about risky matters… if you don't repay them, then whenever or wherever you run into them, they will just abuse you then and there. That's why you try everything that you can to repay the debt… I didn't have any other pathway to find the money. (Nguyệt)

> I did think about it. Where was I going to get the money to repay these people? They said to me that I would only need to [work in cannabis cultivation] for a short period of time; within three months and I would have repaid all my debt. So I thought, okay, I would only be doing this for three months and I would finish paying off this debt. (Thảo)

Participants' accounts of intimidation and threats of violence are, in Pearson and Hobbs' (2003) view, part and parcel of illicit economies without recourse to the law. They argue that it 'ensures contract compliance, and is regarded principally as a means of ensuring that creditors do not default on debt' (2003: 341).

Of the conscripts who were involved in the heroin trade, most worked as mules and one was the 'secretary [*thư ký*]' of a domestic distribution network. Conscripts in the cannabis trade were all 'crop-sitters', taking care of hydroponic crops in suburban houses. In this respect, regardless of the type of drug market they were a part of,

conscripts were all delegated to roles that are generally defined by researchers and law enforcement officers as being at the bottom-end of the drug distribution chain, with the most risk of police detection and arrest. They also had less control over the work they performed. The heroin mules earned more money than cannabis crop-sitters, but at a cost. When the offer of mule-work was first presented to the participants, arrangements concerning payment were also discussed during this encounter. Hồng, for example, explained:

> My role was just to go to Việt Nam when they asked me to, and these people had already organised someone to contact me once I was in Việt Nam.

Hồng was told that the usual rates for these trips was $20 000 – a figure consistent with other participants. However, her handler promised her a premium payment of $50 000 per trip to repay a $100 000 gambling debt:

> Other people only get paid $20 000 for doing one trip but they said that they would pay me $50 000 for each trip. Because I owed them $100 000, they could've asked me [to go to Việt Nam] five times, but they allowed me to do it twice only… but I only did it once and then I got caught.

Participants smuggled the heroin in their luggage or through 'body packing', which refers to the practice of storing drugs inside the body, either in body cavities such as the vagina, rectum or stomach (Gregory & Tierney, 2002). Consistent with Fleetwood (2011), participants neither made this decision themselves and with the exception of one participant, they did not determine how much heroin they carried. In Hồng's case, her handler packed the heroin in the lining of her suitcase. Throughout the ordeal, Hồng vowed that she did not even see or touch the heroin:

> Would you believe that I have never seen what heroin looks like before? Even while doing this, I still didn't see what it looks like!

Cảnh was the only participant who was able to negotiate with her handlers over how much heroin she would smuggle. Cảnh told her handlers that she was only willing to ingest three capsules. Initially, her handlers did not accept it, telling Cảnh that, 'it was not enough'. Being aware that her body was a valuable commodity within this context, Cảnh used it as a tool of negotiation:

> I was lucky that I only swallowed a small quantity of heroin because they asked me to bring more but I didn't want to. I told them that three capsules wasn't a small amount. I said, 'Do you want to force me to the point where I could die? What if it bursts inside my body and I die and leave behind my children?' So they agreed. They tried to force me. They wanted me to swallow more capsules so that they can make a bigger profit. They forced me to swallow a big capsule! If I had swallowed more, my sentence would have been much longer!

Participants indicated that the number of capsules ingested determined the amount of their payment, to be deducted from their gambling debt. Thương, for example, was paid $24 000 for packing three capsules of heroin inside her rectum. Both Thủy and Cảnh reported a slightly lower figure than Thương, with each claiming to be paid $20 000 for the three capsules they had ingested. According to these participants, they ingested 'just less than 100 grams of heroin'. Based on this data, it appears that Hồng – who was the only participant who did not conceal the heroin inside her body – did not receive a premium deal after all. It is likely that her handlers had deceived her into believing that they were doing her a favour claiming that, 'other people only get paid $20 000 for doing one trip'. In the end, Hồng was caught by customs with 'just over 200 grams of heroin' in her suitcase. Taking into consideration that the other three participants were paid between $20 000 - $24 000 for personally transporting 'just less than 100 grams', it is clear that Hồng's rate of $50 000 equalled that of other mules.

Mule-work is fraught with many risks. The risks are even higher in the context of Việt Nam – and most other Asian countries – where individuals are often faced with the death penalty if caught smuggling illicit drugs. Further to this, if the drugs are internally ingested, then mules risk severe health-related harms, or even death, if the drugs they are carrying burst inside their bodies *en route*. Participants informed me that they were aware of all these risks when they agreed to work as a mule. Given this knowledge, I asked participants if they had tried to back out or *thought* about backing out at any stage during the process of performing the mule-work. Cảnh recalled how she thought about backing out twice during her trip in Việt Nam. The first time she thought about it was when she accompanied her handlers on a long car ride to the hotel for the handover of the heroin:

> They don't let you know where they live! They drove me somewhere. I was scared out of my mind. They drove me somewhere very far; to some remote hotel… we were travelling for over an hour. I asked them, 'Where are we going?' And they told me, 'Relax. Don't be scared'. I was so scared that I couldn't get out of the car. When we arrived at the hotel, they handed over the stuff.

The other time was during her flight home to Melbourne:

> I was sitting on the plane and shaking the whole time, right up until the plane landed. I was shaking so much… I've never done anything like this before. I was praying to Buddha, 'Buddha, Buddha, it's because I didn't know better this time. Please give me the strength to be strong. Let me arrive in Australia safely and I won't do it a second time'. I was praying so much… Sitting on the plane for eight hours both my hands and legs were shaking so much. Even when I stepped off the plane I was shaking so much.

Thương also described boarding and disembarking as especially terrifying, and explained that the retribution of backing out overshadowed any desire to walk away from the job:

> I was so scared when I boarded the plane. When I disembarked at Melbourne, I could've discarded the heroin in the toilet but if I threw it away, I was afraid that they would make me compensate for it… $24 000, how was I going to pay that back? At the time, I was so scared that I couldn't throw it away.

Ngọc, the 'secretary [*thư ký*]' of a local heroin distribution network, worked for just 'a few weeks' before her arrest. In the course of her duties, Ngọc was 'forced [*ép*]' to unpack a large consignment of heroin on its arrival from Sydney. She was shocked when the judge sentenced her to more than five years' imprisonment on the basis of a single phone conversation that was recorded between Ngọc and her boss:

> [My boss] told me that I had to stay [in the warehouse] and unpack the stuff because if I didn't do it, nobody else was going to help her and she only trusted me. The courts and police punished me so badly because of that one sentence. They had taped the conversation. What killed me was when [my boss] said that she only trusted me.

The participants enlisted in cannabis cultivation described an experience that was less remunerative and less frightening than the heroin mules. Như, for example, explained:

> I was only babysitting the crops. In Vietnamese, we say, ‘looking after the children [*coi em bé*]’ but in English, it’s called crop sitting. I was hired to take care of the plants.

Như owed $35 000 in gambling debts. Her lenders initially wanted her to ‘go on a holiday’, and ‘bring heroin from Việt Nam to Australia’. She told them that she ‘couldn’t do that because my children are still in school and I can’t leave’, so she ‘looked after the crops for them’ instead. In her own words, Như recounted:

> They calculate beforehand how many harvests I would need to do before I have repaid all of my debt. They even calculate the equipment required to maintain the crops. For example, if they sold the first harvest for $20 000, then they would minus the money spent on the equipment needed to cultivate the crops, so they have made $5 000. They would then deduct $2 500 from my debt. I would still owe them $32 000.

Like mules, crop sitters had minimal contact with their operators, getting just enough information to do their duties. Như, for example, recalled that her request to meet the boss of the operation was continuously refused by her contact:

> Besides my contact, I’ve never met the person who was behind all of this. Whether this person was a man or a woman, I don’t even know! I only knew the person who introduced me to this trade.

Similarly, Phúc stated ‘you don’t know the boss’s face’. Tuyền also emphasised that she ‘only knew one person in this business’. In her own words:

> I wasn’t working for the person who had lent me the money. They introduced me to someone else who was involved in the cannabis trade. I didn’t know the boss though. This one person told me that once we received the money from the crops, the boss would then pass the money down to my contact and then me. You don’t know who the boss is.

Such findings are consistent with Desroches’s observation that ‘underlings are not informed about activities that do not affect them directly, nor are they allowed to know the identities of people above them in the drug chain’ (2005: 125).

Participants typically described the nature of crop sitting as lonely and isolating, mostly because they tended to the crops in the house alone. Participants were required to maintain the crops on a daily basis, which involved ‘turning on the water and

[hydroponic] light system and feeding the crops two to three times a day'. While the duties were overwhelmingly boring, it also created a lot of fear in participants – mostly of police detection. For example, Phúc recalled:

> It was very lonely. That's why I always wandered outside the house, go and eat out, wandering around and going to the markets and then in the late afternoon, I'd return home and look after the plants. While it gets very lonely, you always feel fear. When you enter the house, you feel really scared to the point where you just age very quickly. It's like you think too much and you get stressed. In the evenings I couldn't sleep and the whole day, I'd watch TV and my head was always filled with fear… I only watered the plants and I also had to cut the leaves. I was scared of getting caught but because I was carrying a certain amount of debt, I had no other choice.

The degree of control Phúc was able to exercise over her day-to-day activities whilst crop sitting is an experience echoed by the other crop-sitters. It was apparent that their contacts had trusted them enough to carry out the work with minimal supervision and control. Tuyền similarly recalled how her contact would come by the house just once a week to check up on the crops. In this context, the nature of the relationship between the crop-sitters and their contacts is portrayed as being more collaborative than coercive. In saying that, it was clear that the crop-sitters (and mules) remained implicitly controlled by their contacts based on the fact that they had no alternative but to trust that their contacts would meet their end of the bargain and deduct the debt owed. To further highlight crop-sitters' vulnerability, all but one cultivated the crops in their own home, which exposed them to greater risks of police detection and arrest:

> The plants were grown in my own house. Basically, they provided all the supplies because I allowed them to use my house to grow the plants. When I was losing money from gambling and was in debt, [the lender] realised that I had a house and asked if they could use the house. In the meantime, they would pay the mortgage, the bills, everything. (Tuyền)

> I grew the crops in my house… At the time, my youngest was only two to three months old. I just thought that I would be home anyway taking care of the children… They told me that I would only need to do this for three months and I would finish repaying my gambling debt. (Thảo)

While these participants felt that they had no other viable option but to get involved in cannabis cultivation to resolve their gambling debts, both Tuyền and Thảo highlighted that there was some personal benefit in cultivating the crops in their own homes. For Thảo, it afforded her the flexibility to take care of her young children while Tuyền highlighted the beneficial exchange of having all her household expenses paid for. Nevertheless, growing the crops in their own homes is what led to their eventual arrest, as illustrated by Thảo:

> That's how I came to be in prison… the judge found me guilty because I was growing the plants in my house [Did the organisers get caught too?] No, because they didn't have anything to do with what was in my house. The house was under my name. The police can't catch them. It was only me who was in the house.

Clearly, participants' contacts had strategically avoided police detection and arrest by making sure that their names were not connected to the house in which the crops were being cultivated.

6.4.2 Volunteers

In contrast to the conscripts, volunteers entered the 'drugs pathway' through 'friends from the casino' other than their lenders. They did so as part of an active search for a solution to their desperate circumstances. In this context, they acknowledged their agency and did not describe being 'forced [*ép*]'. Of the eight volunteers, all but one worked in the heroin trade. For these participants, their inroad into the illicit drug trade was facilitated by the small network of regular Vietnamese gamblers at Melbourne's casino, who then introduced them to individuals associated with drug distribution networks. Vân, for example, described how her friend, aware that she was deep in gambling debts, told Vân that 'she knew someone who knew someone' who could help her get out of debt. In her own words, Vân insisted 'no one forced me. It was all up to me'.

Similarly, Hương sought advice from her casino 'friends', asking them 'how can you help me to repay the debt?' They then provided her with a contact 'to help sell heroin'. In another example, Bích recalled that:

> I was losing so much. I then started asking people [at the casino], 'Can you help me. Can you please help me? I'll do anything'. They then said, 'Okay, would you be willing to work in the heroin trade?' They are very direct and straightforward. They said to me, 'Okay then. So you are willing to work in [selling] drugs. So come with me and we can divide the profits'. At the time, you are desperate for money and I was in so much debt. I've lost so much! So I said, 'Yes, I want to. I want to!' I needed to make money quickly so I jumped into this business. So that's what happened. I had to get involved.

Volunteers adopted diverse roles in the drug distribution chain, including coordination, supervision, recruitment, training, distribution and storage. In close connection, they highlighted the importance of trust, reputation and collaboration in their activities. For example:

> They saw that I was an honest person because I had a good reputation. My good reputation is what got me into trouble because if I didn't have a good reputation then these people would never have given me any heroin. (Kim)

> I was holding heroin in exchange for money… I only knew these people from the casino and I also had a good reputation with all my businesses and the Vietnamese community is very small. (Hương)

The speed at which heroin is distributed along the supply chain meant that volunteers recouped their gambling losses quickly and rose in the network. Bích, for example, worked her 'way up from selling to drug users' to being 'the top of [the] network.' This involved 'dealing very large quantities of heroin', having 'ten people work below me', and 'average weekly earnings of $20 000'.

Kim reported average weekly earnings of between $5000 and $7000, and sometimes $10 000. She explained:

> You just need someone to teach you how to mix it, which doesn't take long, and then it's ready to be sold to other people.

Kim progressed from holding the heroin to mid-level distribution and recruitment of mules at the casino:

> These people were actually looking for me! They needed help to get out of their gambling debt… If you are in debt and in need of money to gamble further or repay debts, you have to go to Việt Nam to bring the heroin over and you conceal it internally

> such as in your rectum… I introduced three people and I was responsible for these three people because my boss didn't know them.

The one volunteer in the cannabis trade described herself as 'co-organiser' of a small cannabis operation. Vân 'arranged the house' and her friend organised the equipment and crop-sitter, with a view to dividing the eventual profits. Her reported earnings of '$5000 per month' were much less than those reported in the heroin trade. This partly reflected the longer lead-time in the cannabis trade, between getting started and making money. Nonetheless, Vân more than resolved her debts. She elaborated:

> When I got caught, I was very lucky that I had repaid all my gambling debts. I was successful in cultivating a few batches. After I repaid my gambling debts, I was stupid not to save the rest of the money I made from doing this. I decided to splurge on things such as a brand new plasma TV and designer handbags and things like that.

Vân's spending spree highlights how motives for working in the illicit drug trade can change with time. This finding parallels VanNostrand and Tewksbury's (1999) observations of (male) drug dealers in the US. The women in this study often explained their changing motives in cultural terms. For example, Kim reflected that:

> Generally speaking, Vietnamese people – and you would know this – are excessively greedy. Do you understand? The greedier you are, the worse it is… I enjoyed dealing heroin because it was an easy way to make money. I did feel that way.

Volunteers' failure to 'jump off [*nhảy ra*]' the drugs pathway following debt clearance eventually led to their downfall. At this point, they were invariably surprised by the severity of their sentences. Hương, for example, believed that she 'was not committing a serious crime', because she was not directly involved in distribution: 'I was only holding the heroin'. It was only when she was sentenced to more than five years of imprisonment that she realised that she 'was caught in a very large drug network'. Kim, on the other hand, described how her de facto 'yelled' at her to desist from recruiting drug mules, because he was 'scared' about detection. In the end, one of the mules 'told the police that I was their boss because these people didn't know my boss'. Bích acknowledged 'if I had stopped when I made enough money, then this wouldn't have happened':

> While you are doing this, you can't do it consistently. You do it for a few months and then you take a break because you need to protect your safety. But when you are caught up in all the money that you can make then you get stuck in it and do it constantly. That's when you get caught up with the police and you go to prison. That's what happened to me. The police were following my network, my customers and I didn't know. And that's why I'm in prison.

The common thread across conscripts and volunteers was that their involvement in the illicit drug trade arose through the 'gambling pathway'. Yet different entry points into the 'drugs pathway' produced different outcomes. Conscripts were invariably incarcerated *before* they had repaid their debts; volunteers were invariably incarcerated *after* they had repaid their debts. Furthermore, the median custodial maximum sentence for conscripts was nineteen months; for volunteers it was eight years. In this respect, the women's sentences were apparently congruent with their degree of initiative, autonomy, mobility and control.

It is worth noting that this study did not ask participants – conscripts or volunteers – how much time had lapsed from when they borrowed money from casino lenders to commencing work in the illicit drug trade. In hindsight, asking this question may have provided deeper insight into why some participants were coerced and threatened by their lenders, while others were not. For participants who understood themselves as conscripts, it could be that a lot of time had lapsed since the agreed repayment date. One participant, Thủy, indicated that she was prompted to take action to resolve her gambling debt based on anecdotal stories she had heard about other gamblers in a similar position:

> I heard that if you owe someone money, in the beginning, they will chop your hand or ear off. If you try to hide, they will find you. Your children and family will be punished… Upon hearing that, I was scared.

It is possible that other participants, especially the volunteers, were also exposed to similar stories and may have swiftly taken action, afraid that they themselves would encounter similar predicaments. Nonetheless, both groups insisted that they felt cornered into taking the drugs pathway after exhausting all viable alternatives to resolve their debts quickly. This predicament is perfectly summed up by Hồng in the following excerpt:

> I now understand how gamblers end up in prison because this was my pathway. They reached a point where they could not control themselves any more and that's how they got caught up in drug trafficking… People who lend you the money, they don't allow you to repay in installments. You are so scared because you don't know how to repay all this debt. Gamblers all have families. They are adults and have pride and know how to get embarrassed. You've lost so much money and you're afraid that your family will find out. You're afraid that your friends will laugh at you or you're afraid of your husband. People in here confide in me and say, 'I didn't want this to happen but I was in so much debt, what else am I supposed to do?' This is how it always happens and it won't change.

Conclusion

This chapter establishes a strong association between 'problem gambling' and the illicit drug trade, which, to date, has been overlooked in the literature on problem gambling's social effects. Specifically, it demonstrates the pathway from casino gambling to illicit drug crimes, notably the importation and trafficking of heroin and the urban cultivation of cannabis. The pathway operates at two levels. First, gambling provides the main motivation for drug-related crime: that is, more than half of the 35 participants in this study were motivated by debts incurred through casino gambling. Second, gambling provides the opportunity for drug-related crime: specifically, participants' gambling networks routinely facilitated their entry into the illicit drug trade. However, not everyone in this study was motivated by, or connected to the drug trade through gambling. As Coomber points out, 'how people become drug dealers is of course a multi-layered and contingent process with varying contexts, influences and opportunities' (2006: 165). In the following chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of alternative pathways into the illicit drug trade.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Other pathways

This chapter introduces the remaining 19 participants in the present study, and describes the motives and circumstances that propelled them into the illicit drug trade[12]. According to these participants, the motives that drove their involvement were economic gain (8), non-gambling debt resolution (4), romantic love (4) and drug dependency (3). However, if we are to obtain a comprehensive representation of participants' pathways into the illicit drug trade, it is important to acknowledge that 'motivations [are] only ever part of the picture' (Coomber, 2006: 165). In this respect, it is also critical to explore *how* participants made contact into the illicit drug trade. As illustrated in the previous chapter, access into the drug trade for participants in the gambling cohort was only made possible through gambling networks forged at Melbourne's casino. Most of the participants in this chapter were initiated into the drug trade through personal and social networks encountered in the 'patterns of their everyday life' (Decker & Chapman, 2008: 96). More specifically, they already had inroads into drug distribution networks either through family or friends who were already connected to the drug trade or through participants' own drug usage patterns.

7.1 'I never went into this with the intention to create wealth': Drug trafficking for economic gain or debt resolution

Desroches observes that 'since this is a crime that provides great wealth, the obvious motive for illicit drug trafficking is money' (2005: 53). Yet the quote in the subtitle, which was expressed by Hiền, illustrates that monetary motives in the context of drug trafficking does not always reflect a desire for 'wealth', 'profit' or 'greed' (although for some participants, they were certainly motivating factors to continue trafficking). Instead, participants who fall under the categories of economic gain or non-gambling debt resolution insisted that they started trafficking heroin or cultivating cannabis in a desperate attempt to overcome a financial crisis arising from either long-term

[12] As noted in the previous chapter, one participant denied involvement and insisted that she was mistakenly arrested.

socioeconomic disadvantage, divorce, failing businesses or debt incurred by other family members.

7.1.1 Drug trafficking for economic gain

Of the 35 participants in this study, eight cited economic gain as the primary reason for their involvement in the illicit drug trade. However, given that three participants had misleadingly explained their involvement in terms of economic gain when in actual fact, they had concealed their gambling histories, means that it is more likely that this cohort has a lower number of five participants.

The motive of economic gain in the context of drug trafficking routinely conjures up images of greedy drug traffickers who are all individually focused on pursuing a wealthy, high status lifestyle. Indeed, for a subsector of the (mostly male) drug dealing population, researchers have identified that they *were* solely motivated by the desire to 'earn large sums of money' in order to realise a particular 'lifestyle or social status' (Desroches, 2005; Paoli & Reuter, 2008: 23). Contrary to these findings, motives of economic gain in this study were underpinned by more nuanced and diverse circumstances that were deeply connected to and influenced by participants' familial relationships.

All of the participants in this category reported that they were in financially desperate situations in the months leading up to their involvement in the illicit drug trade. At first glance, Merton's (1938) anomie/strain theory may appear to be the most suitable explanation as to why these participants turned to the drug trade based on the simple observation that they were all unemployed and working in low-paying cash-in-hand jobs. From this perspective, blocked opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors explain why participants chose the illegitimate pathway of drug trafficking. However, just as the neoclassical economic model assumes that individuals single-mindedly join the drugs pathway in pursuit of pecuniary success, the same can be said of a Mertonian interpretation of drug trafficking motives. While blocked opportunities did play a role in participants' decisions to become involved in the drug trade, a closer inspection of their narratives revealed that motives of economic gain had less to do with

any rational desire for wealth and more to do with a need to sufficiently provide for their families or 'an immediate and urgent need for money' (Desroches, 2005: 58).

Dông, for example, framed her involvement in the drug trade within the context of motherhood, insisting that drug trafficking offered her alternative means to provide the basic necessities for her four children:

> People usually say that people who sell heroin are part of the black society. Me, I'm not part of any society. I only went into this to find money to support my children.

Since arriving in Australia as a refugee almost 30 years ago, Dông characterised her life as 'extremely difficult [*cực khổ*]'. Unable to purchase her own home, or at the very least, rent a home in a better suburb, Dông explained that she remained living in the same inner-city government housing flat – widely known for its drug dealing activities. After her husband walked out on the family shortly after arriving in Australia, Dông had struggled to raise her children as a single mother. Her situation was made worse by the fact that she was never able to find a stable, full-time job:

> I couldn't earn a living. Life in Melbourne, the way I see it, it's very difficult to earn money… Things were extremely difficult. I didn't have any money, nothing at all. I worked on a farm for a short period of time but I still didn't have enough money for the family.

At this point, it is important to point out that some women in this study expressed criticism, as well as scepticism, towards women like Dông, who use their children as a moral justification for their involvement in the illicit drug trade. For example, Diễm, who was motivated by romantic love, stated that:

> I just don't accept that reasoning. In Australia, you don't need to go to extremes to look after your children because the system over here makes sure that your children are well cared for. You don't really need the support of the parents in terms of providing the minimum living standards for children – the government makes sure of that. I don't like it when some of the women in here say that they were doing this solely for their children.

The act of critically judging other women drug offenders was commonly observed throughout this study. As we already saw with the gambling cohort, they frequently distinguished themselves from other drug offenders, emphasising that they had no other

choice but to cultivate or traffic drugs as a way to repay their gambling debts. Conversely, the non-gamblers would morally justify their drug offending by pointing out that unlike women who were selfishly driven by gambling, their motives were underpinned by their responsibility as a mother, daughter, sister or wife. These narratives are explored further during discussions of subsequent motives for working in the illicit drug trade.

While Dông's motives centred on her role as a mother, Angela framed her involvement in the drug trade based on her obligation as a daughter to care for her family – reflecting the Vietnamese value of filial piety. Angela is a second-generation Vietnamese-Australian who came to Australia as a young toddler. Angela recounted that she 'grew up in a really poor family' and like Dông, she spent most of her life living in an inner-city government housing estate 'where all the Vietnamese people, all the hard-core people selling drugs hang out'. As previously described, Angela was raised in a single-parent household and experienced many terrifying episodes of threats and intimidation arising from her father's unpaid loans. With an ill mother who was unfit to work, as well as a younger brother to take care of, Angela reasoned that working in the illicit drug trade 'was the best way to find money 'cos I tried working legit but it didn't seem to help'.

There is no doubt that Dông and Angela's narratives about their 'poor' socioeconomic background and subsequent motives for engaging in the illicit drug trade resonate with the Mertonian tradition in that they 'tried working legit' but 'couldn't earn a living'. Again, where Merton's anomie theory falls short is that rather than striving for culturally ideal goals of pecuniary success, Dông and Angela's motives were underpinned by a desperate desire to lift their families out of economically dire circumstances.

Bình and Sương, who were both living in Australia as illegal citizens, also understood their motive of economic gain in terms of provisioning for their family. Both women arrived in Australia alone on visiting visas while their school-aged children remained in Việt Nam. In this context, Bình and Sương's narratives were entwined with responsibilities they had back in Việt Nam as well as circumstances that surrounded their temporary lives in Australia. Upon arrival in Australia, both participants initially worked on farms, along with many other Vietnamese nationals, as a means to earn

money to support their children in Việt Nam. In speaking about the difficulties of life in Australia, Bình reflected, 'people in Việt Nam don't understand how difficult life is over here in Australia. They just assume that life is easy over here'. Describing the circumstances surrounding her motive for working in the drug trade, Bình revealed 'I wanted to earn enough money to start a business in Việt Nam' in order to 'support my family'. Sương's motive was more urgent and specific. During her time in Australia, Sương worked hard picking fruits on the farm because:

> I was just afraid that I wouldn't have enough money to support my children. Why did I come here? I just had one dream and that was for my children to be successful.

Sương vehemently denied that her involvement in the drug trade had anything to do with greed. She explained that while she was working on the farm, she had overheard from other Vietnamese nationals that 'the immigration office had announced that individuals who met certain conditions were eligible to apply for Australian residency'. As Sương's entire family are Australian citizens, having all arrived here as refugees, Sương genuinely believed that 'I met the conditions to stay here'. After spending 'so much money on all the immigration applications, with $2000 here and $3000 there', Sương's application was refused by the immigration department:

> When immigration told me that I couldn't stay here and that I needed to return to Việt Nam, I had no money to take back with me... If I were the type of person to do wrong things, I would've done it a long time ago. I've never done anything wrong like this before. Since being [in Australia], I was happy earning $90 or $100 per day working on the farms; just so long as I had money to support my children in Việt Nam and was able to send them to good schools. It's all because of the problems with immigration. If it weren't for that, then I would've continued working on the farms for a few more years so that I could put my youngest child through university. Then I would have returned to Việt Nam.

The narratives presented thus far reflect the Vietnamese conceptualisation of the self as 'interdependent with the surrounding context'. Moreover, it is 'the self-in-relation-to-others' that is focal in individuals' experiences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 225). Markus and Kitayama further observe that such constructions of the self significantly shape how motives are formed, which in the context of this study, centred on 'other-serving motives' rather than the Western value of 'self-serving motives' (1991: 225).

That said, the motive of economic gain was not always set within the context of provisioning for others. Unlike the other participants in this group, Hiền did not share similar experiences of long-term economic struggles. On the contrary, she reportedly made a comfortable living, first from founding her own textile business shortly after her arrival in Australia as a refugee, and then from regular cash-in-hand jobs in the informal economy. For Hiền, it was the circumstances surrounding the breakdown of her marriage that propelled her into working in the illicit drug trade. Reflecting upon this period of her life, Hiền expressed that she was 'fed up with life [*chán đời*]', mostly because of her husband's infidelity:

> At that point, my hands were completely empty… I had a husband who did not care and I felt sorry for myself. He had a mistress. There was no way that I could live my life like that. He wasn't even worried about me so I ended our marriage… In pressing moments when you're sad and depressed and you have your own needs but you can't attain them, you just get caught up in [the drug trade] and you give it a go to reach that one objective.

That 'one objective' for Hiền was to leave her old life behind and start a new life interstate. However, the financial setback caused by her divorce meant that she needed money to re-establish herself such as 'money to rent a house, a car and this and that'. Hiền claimed that this was the key reason why she decided to seek work in the drug trade. Participants in the following section also reported experiences of financial strain but rather than working in the drug trade for the purpose of economic gain, they started cultivating or trafficking drugs to resolve a non-gambling debt.

7.1.2 Drug trafficking to resolve non-gambling debt

Of the 35 participants in this study, four cited the need to resolve a non-gambling debt as the primary reason for their involvement in the drug trade. What's more, all but one claimed that a family member had incurred these debts.

Ai arrived in Australia as a refugee more than 30 years ago, and is the eldest participant in this category. She is also the only participant who started working in the illicit drug trade as a means to resolve her own debt that she had accumulated through trying to

keep her small business afloat. Ai was very direct in explaining the key reason that shaped her decision to work in the heroin trade:

> The main motive was financial. It's like I couldn't earn a living and I was in debt. For other people, it's because they lost from gambling. They don't have money so they take this path. There are many circumstances… I was losing money from my business and I wasn't making an income or profit. For me, it was debt from my business.

Further highlighting the prevalence of informal lending practices among the Vietnamese community, Ai did not solicit loans from formal financial institutions but obtained loans from within her informal networks:

> When I was working, and my business was not providing an income, I borrowed money from friends. It's from there that you go deeper and deeper into debt and that's why I entered [the drug trade] to find money to repay the debts to these people.

As well as needing to resolve her business debts, Ai also drew on her role as a single mother to highlight the connected motive of 'needing to look after my children so life is a little bit more comfortable'. Since divorcing her husband more than fifteen years ago, Ai explained that 'I've remained single ever since' and 'it was so difficult'.

The remaining three participants in this cohort were among the youngest in this study. Lan and Xuân were in their 20s at the time of interview and both were Vietnamese nationals who had come to Australia as international students. Interestingly, both participants provided remarkably similar stories as to why and how they became involved in the cannabis trade. While a large portion of Lan and Xuân's narratives were devoted to highlighting the double burden of having to pay for their education as well as financially support themselves whilst living in Australia, both participants insisted that their involvement in the drug trade were driven by the desire to help repay their parents' business debts as a result of the global financial crisis that hit Việt Nam. To further rationalise the urge to help her parents in Việt Nam, Xuân drew a comparison between life in Việt Nam and Australia:

> In Việt Nam, there is no such thing as government welfare agencies. Do you think there is such a thing like Centrelink? If you don't make any money in a particular month, then there's no money for food and no money to send your children to school. Whereas over here, the government often pays for the children's education! In Việt Nam, you are the

> one who has to pay for everything. You have to pay for everything from your own pocket. You can't rely on the government to help you out.

Similarly, Lan reasoned that:

> Honestly, if my family weren't confronted with such economic difficulties, then I don't think I would've ever taken this pathway.

At the time of taking up the offer to work in the cannabis trade, both Lan and Xuân maintained that they hid it from their family in Việt Nam. In the case of another participant, Linh, she proclaimed that it was her family who ultimately pressured her into working in the drug trade in order to resolve her brother's outstanding drug debt.

Linh came to Australia with her mother and siblings as refugees when she was only seven years old. Since arriving in Australia, Linh emphasised that her family had undergone many adversities but the worst was when her brother became addicted to heroin during his mid-teens. She recalled how her brother would constantly run away from home, and as the eldest child in the family, it was Linh's responsibility to roam the streets and look for him. The problems associated with her brother's heroin addiction escalated when he 'started owing a lot of money to the drug dealers'. It was at this point that the drug dealers started threatening and intimidating Linh's family:

> My mum said that she couldn't handle it anymore 'cos umm the drug dealers kept coming to the house and asking my brother to pay off the debt. My mum didn't want my step-dad to find out because he works very hard, from seven in the morning to seven at night. He is gone the whole day so he didn't know what was happening… Mum couldn't do anything 'cos she was on the pension… [My brother] needed the money to smoke and so he started dealing. He would get the heroin on credit first and pay them later.

Linh's brother owed over 'ten grand' to the drug dealers. Linh explained that as her brother's heroin addiction worsened, he was 'sleeping all the time' and unable to work to repay his debt. The tipping point at which Linh had to 'step foot into that hole' occurred when the drug dealers barged into her family home by 'cutting through the security door' and 'put a gun to my brother's head'. Consequently, Linh explained that she had no choice but to surrender to the drug dealers' request and work as a domestic heroin courier, driving the drugs from one supplier to the next, in order to resolve her

brother's debt. In this context, Linh was essentially enlisted into the heroin trade, which echoes the experience of participants who understood themselves as conscripts in the gambling cohort.

With the exception of Linh, all other participants within the categories of economic gain and non-gambling debt resolution emphasised that they started working in the illicit drug trade through their own volition. In the next section, I specifically discuss the circumstances under which these participants gained entry into what is generally portrayed as a 'closed and secretive world' (Desroches, 2005: 65).

7.1.3 Making contact into the illicit drug trade

Of the nine participants who identified economic gain and non-gambling debt as the primary reason for their involvement in the illicit drug trade, all but two participants were introduced by people from their own personal and social networks. As we saw in Linh's case, her brother's drug dealers coerced her into working as a domestic heroin courier while Bình reported that she was recruited by a stranger.

Drug trafficking opportunities through personal and social networks

Of the seven participants who were initiated into the drug trade through their own personal and social networks, four were 'invited [*rủ*]' by a friend or boyfriend while the other three participants actively pursued their friends for the opportunity to work in the drug trade. This section first considers the experiences of those who were 'invited' into the drug trade.

In Ai and Dông's case, their inroads into drug distribution networks were not, in Coomber's words, 'too far removed' (2006: 165) from the social world they inhabited. Both participants explained that they were presented with the offer to sell heroin during a casual gathering with friends. Ai, for example, recalled:

> I had two close friends who saw that I was going through a really tough time financially and so they said that they had something for me to do in order to find money to repay my debts [Did you know that they were already involved in this?] Yes, I already knew that they were in this business. At the time, I was going through such a tough time that I

> wasn't thinking. I just took the risk so that I could repay my debts, take care of my children and to make enough money to lead an easier life… I was just happy that my friends were able to help me.

Echoing Ai's experience, Dông explained:

> It's like you hang out socially and then your friends introduce you. They say, 'You're really struggling. Why don't you just [work in the heroin trade] to find money?'… It's just friends inviting each other…

In the case of both Lan and Xuân, they first came across the offer to work as crop-sitters through their boyfriends, who also happened to be Vietnamese international students. Lan went as far as stating that the Vietnamese-Australians who approached her boyfriend with the offer of crop-sitting work 'enticed [*dụ dỗ*]' him into doing it'. In her own words:

> My boyfriend and I had been together for two years already. He was never involved in any of this when we first started going out. The people who were organising this were very sweet towards him and enticed him into doing it. He was lured into it. He then asked me, 'Do you want to do it?' At the time I felt that I didn't have any other alternative but to accept the offer because of my family's circumstances in Việt Nam and I also had to pay my education fee, which was $20 000 per year.

Based on her own observation of the recent rise in Vietnamese nationals participating in the urban cultivation of cannabis, Lan further explained:

> From my own experience, I think it's quite easy to enter this pathway because there are so many international students over here and you need to understand that one of the main objectives of coming to Australia is to help their families in Việt Nam. And the quickest way to help their families is to take this pathway.

This is a comment that was consistently reiterated by many participants in this study, which strongly suggests that Vietnamese drug distribution networks are purposely recruiting Vietnamese nationals into the cannabis trade. This last point is further strengthened by Sương's admission:

> It's very easy. People go up to the farms and invite you to do this. They see that I've been working on the farms for so many years and don't have much money saved up. It's like my friends, they see me and feel sorry for me. They say, 'I see that you're working

> so hard but you never have any spare money left over. Why don't you just return to Melbourne and just [work in the cannabis trade]?'

Sương was one of three participants who actively pursued opportunities to work in the drug trade through friends or acquaintances who were already connected to drug distribution networks. In Sương's case, she insisted that she never had any reason to go on the drugs pathway before; she only chose this pathway when 'immigration told me that I couldn't stay [in Australia] and that I needed to return to Việt Nam. I needed money to take back to my children'. To further support her claim, Sương exclaimed that, 'Oh my God! I was always being asked. I had opportunities before and I never did it'. Similarly, Hiền also claimed that she never considered working in the drug trade – it was only when she was faced with the desperate urge to start a new life interstate following her divorce that she decided to enter this business. Both Hiền and Sương knew a friend who was involved in cannabis cultivation and decided to confide in them about their situation, with the hope of getting some work:

> I had a friend who was growing her own cannabis crops in her house as a way to make money to give to her sick mother in Việt Nam. I told my friend about my situation. She said that if that were the case, then she would show me how to set up everything. (Hiền)

> We used to work together on the farm but he later returned to Melbourne and started working in the cannabis trade. I heard that he was making a lot of money so I confided in him. I didn't know where else to get the money from and I was so upset and that's why I decided to do this. (Sương)

In Angela's case, her initiation into the heroin trade had a lot to do with the physical environment in which she lived. Angela lived in an inner-city government housing estate and in her view, it played a significant role in creating the opportunity to be associated with drug distribution networks. Her initiation into heroin trafficking began when she serendipitously bumped into a friend at the local milk bar. Angela recalled that her friend offered to 'shout' her a drink and when he pulled out his wallet to pay for the drink, she saw that 'his wallet was packed full of money':

> My friend just goes, 'Do you want a drink? I'll shout you a drink', and then he pulled out his wallet and it was packed full of money, so I was like 'Oh my God, where did you get all this money from?' so he told me it was from drug dealing. Then I kept asking him, how, you know, how you can start up and what do you have to do. Most of

> the people were dealing drugs because they were hooked on it but I wanted to get into the business 'cos I was like craving for the money. I needed the money… My friend just goes you need $700 to start up so it took me like forever to get that money and then my friend introduced me to his suppliers.

Consistent with previous studies on the function of networks and opportunities in the illicit drug trade, these participants demonstrated that personal and social relationships encountered 'in the pattern of everyday life' (Decker & Chapman, 2008: 102) played a significant role in facilitating their entry into the drug trade. Moreover, Decker and Chapman suggest that, 'it is unlikely for a stranger to be approached on the street to assist in a drug smuggling effort' (2008: 96). However, in Bình's case, she claimed that this was how she made contact into the illicit drug trade.

Recruitment into the drug trade by a stranger

Upon returning to Melbourne following months of working as a fruit-picker in country Victoria, Bình started 'asking for jobs as a dishwasher in restaurants' in well-known Vietnamese commerical hubs. One day, whilst she was sitting in a busy marketplace, Bình explained that she had randomly struck up a conversation with another Vietnamese person:

> I don't know any English so when I meet other Vietnamese people, I get excited… I met this person while sitting outside on the street [of a busy marketplace]. She was Vietnamese and I was happy because we could converse with each other in Vietnamese. She asked how I was, what did I do and where I was living. This person had been in Australia for a long time and was willing to help me. I just told her my story and how difficult it had been since arriving in Australia. She told me that she would help me. She saw that I had no one in Australia, and it'd been very difficult for me. So she brought me to a house and allowed me to stay there.

When Bình was offered a place to stay, she said that there was no mention of working in the drug trade. According to Bình, 'this person said that she would only help me, give me a place to stay'. It was only when Bình had been living in her new accommodation for a few weeks that she was made aware of the crop sitting work:

> The person would come over and visit and talk to me. One day, she said that she would give me work… She asked me to do these things each day. She told me that I didn't have to go outside. These plants needed to be maintained inside the house. That's when I asked about these plants, wondering why they needed to be planted inside the house. She just told me that these plants couldn't be brought outside under the sun. I then asked what these plants were called and that's when I found out that they were cannabis crops.

Bình was told by her contact that because she was an overseas citizen, the consequences of getting caught by the police would not lead to imprisonment but that 'I would just be deported to Việt Nam'. In her mind, the opportunity to earn $10 000 in exchange for three months of crop sitting was too good to refuse. Bình reasoned that, 'ten thousand Australian dollars amounts to over one hundred million dongs. I could start a business in Việt Nam with that amount of money!'

At first glance, Bình's account of being recruited into the cannabis trade by a stranger does seem implausible. However, based on the narratives of other Vietnamese nationals in this study, it is not unusual for Vietnamese-Australians to cold recruit newly arrived international students and illegal immigrants to work in the cannabis trade. As previously mentioned, it is also common knowledge among the Vietnamese community, including many of the participants in this study, that many Vietnamese nationals come to Australia with the intention to work in the cannabis trade as a means to make money to help their families in Việt Nam. This echoes the current trend identified by Silverstone and Salvage (2010) in the UK, whereby Vietnamese nationals are increasingly found to be part of a global network in the operation of the urban cultivation of cannabis.

7.1.4 Working in the illicit drug trade

Of the nine participants who were driven by the motives of 'economic gain' and 'non-gambling debt resolution', five were involved in the urban cultivation of cannabis and four worked in the heroin trade. Of the five participants who worked in the cannabis trade, four were Vietnamese nationals who had all performed the role of crop-sitting. The only Vietnamese-Australian in the cannabis cohort was Hiền, who claimed to have operated her own small cannabis cultivating operation. The four participants who were

involved in the heroin trade occupied diverse roles from domestic courier to mid-high level distributor. I will first consider the accounts of participants in the cannabis cohort, beginning with the Vietnamese nationals' accounts of their experiences of working as crop-sitters.

The Cannabis Cultivation Trade

With the exception of Bình, who was reportedly offered crop-sitting work by someone she had just randomly met in a busy Vietnamese marketplace, the other Vietnamese nationals explained that their friend or boyfriend introduced them into the cannabis trade. Yet, these participants still ended up in the same low-rank crop-sitting role as Bình. In the case of Lan and Xuân, who were introduced by their boyfriends, further probing revealed that their boyfriends had no prior relationships with the people who were actually involved in the cannabis cultivation operation. Both Lan and Xuân exclaimed that their boyfriends were introduced by third parties. In Sương's case, the friend whom she met whilst working on the farm and whom she actively pursued for cannabis work was later described as 'just an acquaintance [*người quen thôi*]'. In this context, it is apparent that participants' weak relational ties with members of the cannabis network positioned them at the lowest end of the distribution chain.

Echoing the experiences of the conscripts in the gambling cohort, the crop-sitters in this group described their tasks as overwhelmingly boring and isolating. Bình, for example, explained that:

> I was bored because I didn't go anywhere. [My contact] did tell me that if I wanted to go out, they showed me which bus to take. I would take the bus and then the train to go to the Vietnamese markets. I would buy Vietnamese movies and music videos so I had something to do at home. I didn't see or talk to anyone so I had to find something to do to occupy my time… There were over 100 plants inside the house and they varied in size from large to small. They taught me how to take care of the plants such as how to work the water system and what to feed the plants.

Sương similarly recalled that, 'I was just the person who was taking care of the plants such as watering them on a daily basis… I was working on my own. They provided the house for me'.

In contrast to the experiences of the Vietnamese nationals, Hiền, a Vietnamese-Australian, was 'very close' with the person who assisted her in setting up her own cannabis crops. Hiền explained that her friend was in fact a Vietnamese national who had been living in Australia unlawfully for the last ten years:

> In the beginning, she worked on a farm and she told me that farming work was inconsistent and so her money situation was very tight… She told me that someone had introduced her to [cannabis work] and she just did it because at least she was able to make money to live… My friend was growing the plants inside her house and then she showed me how to grow it in my garage.

Hiền insisted that aside from her friend, there was no one else involved in her small cannabis cultivation operation. She was adamant that she was not part of any large distribution syndicate. In her own words, Hiền claimed:

> I was so sad and upset about my husband… I just thought I'd get involved and try [cultivating one or two harvests] on my own and if there's money then I'd arrange my family plans but I had just started and didn't make anything…

Participants in the cannabis cohort reported to have worked in the cannabis trade for less than three months before they got caught. Sương, for example, exclaimed 'I was almost finished with that work and only had one more week until I returned to Việt Nam but then I got caught'. While Hiền did not reveal the value of the cannabis crops she was cultivating herself, the other participants reported a figure that was consistent with other crop-sitters in this study – which amounted to approximately '$10 000 for three months' work'.

The Heroin Trade

With respect to the remaining four participants whose motives were driven by economic gain or non-gambling debts, but who were involved in the heroin trade rather than cannabis cultivation, all but one claimed to have made enough money to meet their initial objectives. Moreover, these participants got their start in heroin trafficking through friends and remained on the drugs pathway for many years. Ai and Angela, for example, had been dealing heroin for more than five years. While this was Ai's first conviction, Angela had previously served time in prison for heroin trafficking.

In Ai's case, she explained 'I started working in this business shortly after I divorced my husband'. Although Ai had been involved in the heroin trade for many years, she described herself as being 'on the bottom of the network.' More specifically, she claimed:

> My boss would give me the supply and then I would give it to someone below me and get interest. I only had one more person below me. Overall, there were five or six people in my network.

However, when I enquired Ai about her average weekly earnings from heroin dealing, it was apparent that she was not working at the retail level – which is pervasively understood as the bottom-end of the drug distribution chain. She admitted that, 'honestly, in one week, I could make over $10 000. It depends'. Such high earnings are more consistent with figures reported by other participants in this study who identified themselves as occupying mid-high positions in their heroin distribution networks. Furthermore, in the same way that some participants in the gambling cohort – namely, the volunteers – continued on the drugs pathway even after they had resolved their gambling debts, Ai confessed that greed motivated her to continue trafficking despite having repaid all her business debts:

> There were times deep inside where I did want to stop but if I left, where would I get the money to continue living like this. It's because there was a little bit of greed you know. I found that it was such an easy way to make money so I continued doing it to find money… Because I was making such a lot of money, I was greedy and so I didn't want to stop. If I weren't greedy, then I would've stopped and I wouldn't have gotten caught. I was just so greedy.

Angela, who began dealing heroin at the street-level, was also motivated to continue trafficking because 'all this money kept coming in'. She added:

> …because I was a girl and I was young, I sort of just abused the system and took advantage of it because they never threw me in jail. So I just kept dealing, dealing and dealing...

Angela claimed that her mother had 'never gone against me working in this' because 'she knew that I had to do what I could to keep my family alive'. The only fear Angela's mum had about Angela's involvement in heroin trafficking was that she would

drift into heroin addiction. According to Angela, that is 'why she kept me at home by her side where she could at least keep her eye on me'. Angela also described a period when she had temporarily stepped off the drugs pathway and returned to studying and led a 'straight life'. However, she explained that she 'had to go back into the business again' when her mother started owing debts from *hụi* – the Vietnamese informal practice of lending and borrowing. As Angela explained:

> Mum was a single mum and never worked… She played *hụi* and it didn't go too well because people would run off with the money and then things got worse… My mum was the boss of the *hụi* and all these people who were involved in the *hụi* demanded the money from us. So because she had all these *hụi* debts, I had to get back into the business again.

At the time of her most recent arrest and incarceration, Angela claimed that she was caught in a large drug operation, 'from the big fishes to the small ones'. She noted that, 'I was in the middle'.

Dông, whose involvement in the heroin trade was also facilitated by a friend, maintained that she only performed peripheral roles in her distribution network. For example, she said she 'only made phone calls' and 'sold heroin to users'. Although she had planned to 'just do it for a period of time' Dông found it too difficult to give it up because the money from heroin dealing allowed her to 'provide for my four children'.

Linh, who was coerced into the heroin trade, exclaimed that, 'I didn't want to do it!' but when the drug dealers held a gun to her brother's head, Linh explained 'after this happened, I didn't care about getting caught [from the police]. My only priority was to repay the debt by brother owed'. By implication of being coerced, Linh's role as a domestic heroin courier did not involve much agency on her part: 'You are not in control but they are in control of you. They tell you what to do and you do it'. Linh confessed that this was not her first time in prison; she had previously been convicted for the same crime. The upshot is that with each arrest, Linh's bosses had increased the debt owed by her brother to compensate for the heroin that was seized by police upon capture. With no other alternative to resolve the debt, Linh now believes that she is 'stuck in a vicious circle'. She elaborated:

> The bank is not going to give me a personal loan because I don't have a job. The only way is to step into this business. What the [drug dealers] want is for you to work for them and then they deduct the money. That's it. Working in a legitimate job, I would only get like 500 bucks in one week. They're not going to wait that long for you to repay the debt.

According to Linh, the only way this will end is 'to catch them but the police is not doing anything so what can I do?' She commented 'once you enter this underworld, it's not easy to step out'.

This study has thus far demonstrated that the circumstances driving participants' motives are not only diverse but also influenced by a multitude of cultural, environmental, structural and situational factors including gambling debts, socioeconomic disadvantage, financial crises and marital breakdown. In terms of gender dynamics, this study departs from key themes of recent scholarship which suggest that 'women's infiltration of drug selling is controlled and exploited by men' (Anderson, 2005: 374). On the contrary, many participants were separated or divorced prior to working in the illicit drug trade and it was this alienation from their marital or familial relationships that gave rise to their involvement in illicit drug markets. Hiền, for example, reflected:

> My husband didn't love me anymore… I didn't have anything else attached to my life. I shouldn't have gone down this pathway but because within that moment when you're not thinking straight, you're so depressed, disheartened and in despair, you feel there's nothing holding you back any longer.

Of participants who were in relationships, most claimed that it was they who took on more active roles in the drug trade while their husbands or de factos performed more subordinate roles, or in some cases, refused to be involved in the drug trade at all. For example, Bích, who initially jumped onto the gambling pathway in an effort to recover her husband's debt, urged him to become involved in heroin trafficking once their gambling debts spiralled out of control:

> My husband was too afraid to do it. My husband didn't want to do it. It was me who did [everything]. He was just driving the stuff for me.

Similarly, Linh reported that she initially tried to hide her involvement in the heroin trade from her partner because ‘he didn’t agree with this business’. Nonetheless this study found that for a small proportion of participants, their association with the illicit drug trade was the direct result of their husbands or de factos’ involvement. For these participants, their engagement in the drug trade was motivated by ‘romantic love’.

7.2 ‘I was only associated through my husband because I love him’: Drug trafficking for love

Liên’s admission that she ‘was only associated through my husband because I love him’ echoes the sentiment of four of the 35 participants in this study. These participants explicitly stated from the outset of our conversations that they were initially kept in the dark about their husband or de facto partner’s involvement in the illicit drug trade. In an effort to further avoid the shame associated with their incarceration, two of these participants described their movement into the drug trade as an ‘accident’ rather than through intent:

> It’s because I accidently got involved through my husband when he brought the crops home and asked me to answer the phone for him and talk to his friends over the phone. (Liên)

> Let’s call it an accident. That’s how I got involved in this. (Diễm)

Both Diễm and Liên, along with Tâm, were incarcerated for their roles in the urban cultivation of cannabis while Mai was incarcerated for her part in the heroin trade. This section first considers the circumstances surrounding the three participants whose husbands were involved in the cannabis trade.

Both Tâm and Liên’s husbands cultivated the cannabis crops in the back of their homes while Diễm’s husband grew the crops in a friend’s factory. At the beginning of my conversation with Tâm, she originally sought to rationalise why, as a wife, she was not made aware of her husband’s illicit drug activities. She did so by drawing on culturally based notions of gender roles to justify her ignorance:

> If you belong to a Vietnamese family, then the majority of the time, it’s the husband who is the breadwinner. The woman’s responsibility is to take care of the children.

> That's it. You're Vietnamese, you understand the Vietnamese custom: Vietnamese men don't normally allow or disclose their businesses to their wives.

However, as the conversation unfolded, it became apparent that Tâm could no longer maintain this original story, as she was aware that it was unlikely that she had no knowledge that her husband was cultivating cannabis from their house. Subsequently, she confessed:

> I did know that he was doing this at the back of our house but I didn't think that he was cultivating a lot of crops. I just left the garage to him, to do whatever he wanted. I knew that this was illegal but I didn't argue against him doing it.

Conversely, both Liên and Diễm maintained that they were surprised to find out that their husbands had already set up plans to be involved, or were already involved in the cannabis trade for some time without their knowledge:

> One day he just brought the [cannabis] crops home. I blame him for our situation. I never had any intention of getting involved in this business but I was only associated through my husband because I love him. (Liên)

> I didn't even know that he was involved in this when we first met. When I found out, I was already in love with him! And we already had a child together. (Diễm)

When I probed participants' thoughts about why their husbands started cultivating cannabis in the first place, they offered reasons that were consistent with those identified by other participants in this study. Liên, for example, claimed that her husband was motivated to cultivate cannabis in order to repay debts incurred through *chơi hụi*. Echoing the experience of other participants, Liên and her husband, who were organisers of a *hụi* syndicate, found themselves under great financial stress when other members in the syndicate defaulted on their loans:

> Have you heard of *hụi*? [Yes, of course] We were the organisers of a very big *hụi*[13] and when the people didn't repay the money, we had to take on the responsibility and pay back the money to everyone else in the *hụi*. But we didn't have the money to repay the debt. We ended up selling our house so that we could repay the debt but even that

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[13] Liên declined to disclose the amount of *hụi* debt owed only to reveal that it was 'a lot'. Given that Liên and her husband were unable to settle their debt following the sale of their house provides a good indication that the debt was most likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.

> wasn't enough. It was a very big *hụi.* When my husband brought the crops home, he told me that he wanted to make our lives easier. He never thought that he would end up in prison or that I would be dragged into this.

Although Liên identified romantic love as the key motive as to why she assisted in her husband's cultivation operation, the circumstances that precipitated her husband's involvement strongly suggest that her willingness to participate was also driven by the connected motive to resolve the *hụi* debt.

Tâm's husband told her that he needed to 'get into this' in order to help pay for his parents' substantial medical bills in Việt Nam. According to Tâm, her husband's friends introduced him into the cannabis trade, telling him that: 'if you need money quickly, then we'll show you which pathway to take'. Although Tâm claimed to have never been active in her husband's cultivation operation, it was she who 'took the fall for everything' while her husband avoided imprisonment by fleeing to Việt Nam. In her own words:

> I don't know whether he knew the police was onto the network but he escaped to Việt Nam and that's why I'm here today… I haven't spoken to him till this day and I'm being charged for large commercial quantity because I was living at that address; the house was under my name. He took off and went into hiding and I took the fall for everything.

That said, Tâm did mention that while she and her husband had originally agreed that she would bear the full legal brunt of her husband's cultivation operation in the event of police detection - based on the assumption that as a woman, and a mother, the court would be more lenient towards Tâm than her husband – her husband's disappearance to Việt Nam took her by complete surprise. As a consequence of her husband's actions, Tâm has had to rely on family friends to take care of their children during her incarceration. In spite of this betrayal, Tâm insisted that she will not 'dog in' her husband or members of his network for fear of retribution. Subscribing to the Vietnamese customary practice of maintaining a 'wall of silence', particularly in the context of police enquiries, Tâm explained:

> You know how Vietnamese people work; it's a very small community. If you report to the police or dog them in, then the whole group would know. You need to be quiet…

> It's best to keep quiet and go to prison because if I were to tell on them, then I'd be scared for my future.

In a similar scenario, Diễm's husband reportedly 'just took off' prior to her arrest. Diễm did not understand why her husband needed to earn money through cannabis cultivation because, as she puts it, 'our family circumstances were quite good'. In explaining her own reasons for 'following my husband', Diễm stated:

> I didn't get caught on this pathway because I didn't have money or because I was starving… In terms of needing things to live and survive, I wasn't lacking in anything. I didn't do this because I was greedy for money. I was already making decent money from my own [legitimate] job. It was because of my husband, whatever he asked me to do, I would do it because I loved him. [The police] had tapped the phones and listened in to our conversations and knew that I took on a lot of responsibilities for my husband. So at the very least, I'm guilty of being an accomplice. Even though I was only marginally involved, the fact that I had my hand in it meant that I'm also guilty.

In the end, Diễm – like Tâm – bore all the legal consequences and was convicted of cultivating 'a large commercial quantity' of cannabis while her husband, who, at the time of interview, was still 'nowhere to be found'.

In contrast to the three participants discussed thus far, Mai was incarcerated for her involvement in the heroin trade. According to Mai, her partner – whom she described as 'more than a boyfriend but not exactly a husband' – had been trafficking heroin for 'months' before she found out. It was during this revelation that Mai was also made aware of her partners' past gambling problems. This was partly the reason why he started trafficking heroin. She was told that he needed to repay gambling-related debts to 'friends' whom, according to Mai, 'he had known from a long time ago'. Throughout our conversation, Mai frequently reiterated her 'great disdain for this business' and even pointed out that she had always discouraged her own teenage children from 'hanging out with the bad crowd'. However, she feared that if she didn't help her partner, she would jeopardise their relationship because 'he may think that I didn't love him anymore'. In this context, assisting her partner symbolised her commitment to their relationship. In the beginning, Mai occasionally accompanied her partner in the car whenever he met a client or supplier but as time progressed, she explained that she started taking on more responsibilities such as liaising with clients on her own.

At first glance, it could be argued that participants' marginalised roles in their partners' drug operation only reinforces women's subordination to men within illicit drug markets. However, a closer inspection of participants' narratives revealed a more complex and nuanced account than what is usually elucidated by 'victim-centred versions told by past and present scholars' (Anderson, 2005: 375). Even though the women in this group became entwined in the drug trade as a direct result of their partners' involvement, they made it clear that their entry was not characterised by coercion or exploitation. Based on participants' narratives, it was evident that they chose to engage in their partners' drug operation through their own volition. At the same time, however, there was a deep sense that participants' motives of romantic love was underpinned by an unspoken fear that refusal to acquiesce to their partners' request may add strain, or jeopardise the relationship. From this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that participants' decisions to become involved in the drug trade were underpinned by a strong desire to keep the family together, which may have been deeply influenced by the cultural value of family solidarity. This last point is supported by Diễm's comment, when she exclaimed: 'When I found out, I was already in love with him! And we already had a child together'. Becoming involved in the drug trade was the participants' attempt to influence the events in their lives, which, in this case, was to maintain the stability of the family unit.

In choosing to construct their involvement through the motive of romantic love, participants also sought to disassociate themselves from other Vietnamese women drug offenders, claiming that they 'didn't do this for the money'. Mai, for example, claimed:

> I didn't even keep one cent to myself during my time in the business. I just collected the money and immediately gave it to him.

Diễm, who was more explicit in attempting to set herself apart from other 'greedy' drug traffickers, described the circumstances that drove her involvement as 'special'. She elaborated:

> There are many people who are greedy for money and there are many people who get caught up in gambling and that is why they take this pathway. But my circumstances are special in that I didn't do this for the money and I never got involved in gambling. It was because I loved my husband.

The final pathway into the illicit drug trade identified by this study was through participants' own drug usage patterns. While traditional accounts of women drug traffickers have generally conceptualised their initiation into the drug trade as being primarily dictated by their drug use, I was routinely told by many participants throughout the interviews that, 'most Vietnamese women who are in [prison] don't use drugs'. Such observations are clearly reflected in the present findings, where only a small proportion of participants started selling drugs as a means to support their drug dependency.

7.3 Drug trafficking to support a heroin dependency

Of the 35 participants in this study, only three claimed that their involvement in drug trafficking was an adjunct to their drug dependency. Moreover, all three participants recognised that they represented a minority group among the Vietnamese women prisoners. Khánh, for example, pointed out that 'the Vietnamese women are in here because of either growing cannabis or trafficking heroin but they don't use like me'. These three participants were reportedly long-term heroin users, having been introduced to heroin smoking more than ten years ago, during a period when, as Vy recalled, 'heroin was just around and it was normal'. The period to which Vy refers to was the mid to late 1990s, a time when the prevalence of heroin use among mostly young-Vietnamese-Australians intensified as a result of the growth of street-based heroin markets in Vietnamese-concentrated areas across Sydney and Melbourne. All three participants reported that they have never injected heroin but had only ever smoked it.

Both Vy and Khánh's account of their initiation into heroin use echoes the trajectory of many other young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users documented in previous studies (Ho, 2006; Webber, 2002). Both had started smoking heroin with their peers out of 'curiosity' and 'to block out stuff'. What initially began as a 'social thing' eventually developed into a 'habit that got out of control'. While psychological distress associated with family breakdown was recognised as a factor that made them more vulnerable to drug use, both Vy and Khánh insisted that the main reasons why and how they became 'hooked onto heroin' was the result of their social environment. Growing up during the peak of the 'heroin epidemic' meant that it was almost impossible to avoid its exposure,

particularly when heroin use had become a normalised activity among their friendship networks and 'it was just easy to get stuff':

> It's really hard when all your friends are doing it. It really affects you. I lived in [an inner-city suburb] and it was really bad at the time because it was near where people deal and that. It was like a fashion thing. When I grew up, it was just normal and around. But now, I have a 15-year old sister and their generation don't do this. (Vy)

> If you've never been introduced into it or never been exposed to it, then you wouldn't know anything about it so it's basically the exposure… all my friends were doing it at the time and then I was curious about it. (Khánh)

The third participant in this cohort, Quyên, was also initiated into heroin use during the mid-1990s but unlike the profile of Vietnamese-Australian heroin users portrayed in previous studies, Quyên did not start using heroin until she was in her thirties. Furthermore, while many young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users generally explain their pathway into heroin use within 'a context of normalisation' (Ho, 2006: 108), Quyên emphasised that her own downward spiral into heroin use was the culmination of an endless series of personal tragedies she had suffered since escaping Việt Nam as a refugee:

> I was so depressed. That's why I started playing white[14]… Looking back on my life, I was not lucky like other people. I can't believe I had to eat human flesh while at sea and at 28 years old, I was told that I couldn't have any children and then I married a man who turned out to be bisexual. I felt sorry for myself; I have no husband and no children. When I die, who will attend my funeral? I don't have anybody. In the end, I was so depressed.

Although the number of drug users in this study consists of just a small sample, it is worth noting that stories about their initiation into drug use and subsequent drift into drug dealing deviate from the leading tale about women drug users on two key points: first, participants did not start using drugs 'in the context of intimate relationships with men' (Evans et al., 2002: 486). Just as the literature has shown that male initiation into drug use occurs within the context of friends rather than intimate relationships, a similar finding was also found for the women in this study, who all claimed that 'I was hanging

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[14] 'Playing white' is a common euphemism to mean using heroin.

around friends who were using'. This brings us to the second related point, which is that participants' progression into drug dealing was not the result of being 'cut off from their partners who normally supplied them with drugs' (Denton, 2001: 57). Even though participants were in an intimate relationship at the time of deciding to 'go down the pathway of selling', this was an active choice that they had made for themselves, as illustrated by Khánh in the following excerpt:

> My boyfriend at the time, he was using too and umm we both kind of got out of control because our heroin habit got larger and so we needed more to feel better. So I said to him, you know, either we quit because we could no longer sustain it so we stop or there's only one other option and that was to get involved in selling [heroin]. At the time, we both decided that we would sell.

Khánh further highlighted that it was she who 'did most of the work'. Again, she insisted that this was out of her own choice:

> I used to be worried about him, like thinking if something happens I don't want to be sitting at home not knowing what's happening so I'd rather go. When we sold from our flat, I'd be the one at home so the customers would come to the window and I'd pass through the [heroin].

Both Vy and Quyên also maintained that they started dealing heroin on their own. Given that they were already associated with the heroin trade through their own drug using habit, their subsequent move into drug dealing was made easy as they already had existing connections with suppliers and buyers. Vy, for example, explained:

> I started dealing because I knew one person who introduced me to someone else so I ended up with heaps of customers… Just say for example you had a cousin who introduced you to me and that cousin had a friend that knew girls who worked at brothels. That's how I got all my customers anyway.

Consistent with the actions of other participants in this study, the women in this cohort sought to morally differentiate themselves from other Vietnamese drug offenders by stating that, 'I only started dealing to support my habit'. They further justified this by claiming that they had only distributed heroin at the retail level and thus 'didn't sell big'. Quyên, for example, reasoned that 'I just sold to survive because I was playing white. I was never in this to make money'. On the flipside, many of the non-drug using

participants perceived drug users as categorically more deviant based on the observation that such individuals are controlled by their addiction. For example, Ai – whose involvement in heroin trafficking was driven by a need to repay a non-gambling debt – stated: 'I only sold heroin to find money but in terms of users, they had to sell heroin to support their habit. I don't know what to do with these people. I can't guarantee that they would do it anymore'. In this context, drug users are perceived to be continuously trapped in a vicious cycle of using and dealing.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that far from being motivated by the single-minded pursuit of economic success, the reasons that drove Vietnamese women's participation in the illicit drug trade were contingent upon a wide range of circumstances. The categories of motives identified in the present chapter include economic gain, non-gambling debt resolution, romantic love and drug dependency. Contrary to the neoclassical economic assumption of 'individual responsibility' (Fleetwood, 2011: 377), participants' motivations for working in the illicit drug trade were culturally and socially embedded, and deeply influenced by their familial relationships. In this context, discourses around traditional Vietnamese cultural values and beliefs around the notion of family solidarity emerged as a key explanatory framework from which to understand why participants chose to join the drugs pathway.

In addition to highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics that underpinned participants' motives, this chapter also demonstrates that pathways into this clandestine world was primarily made possible through the women's own personal and social networks. In addition, it was identified that opportunities to infiltrate illicit drug networks were, above all else, determined by the participants' Vietnamese ethnicity. Apart from the three participants who identified themselves as user-dealers, everybody else reported that they had 'only worked with other Vietnamese people.' Confirming previous suggestions that 'ethnic commonalities is or could be the basis for trust relations' (Murji, 2007: 796), most participants expressed the view that they did not 'trust Western people'. Such trust relations were facilitated by implicit understandings that 'Vietnamese people keep things to themselves'. A further reason why participants only collaborated with other Vietnamese people was the simple fact that they could not speak

any other language except Vietnamese. As a result, their social networks only comprised of people of Vietnamese background: ‘It’s because our Vietnamese community only socialise with each other. If one person is doing this, then the whole group knows and they introduce each other into it’.

This chapter also demonstrates that the circumstances surrounding participants’ involvement in the drug trade cannot be reduced to binary conceptualisations that view their actions as either demonstrating agency or victimisation. For most participants, decisions to work in the drug trade were often made under conditions of not their own choosing (Maher, 1997). In this respect, it was hoped that by partaking in the illicit drug trade, participants could, to some degree, influence the events in their lives and reclaim some agency under constrained circumstances. Such findings would have been overlooked if analysed within the purview of neoclassical economics, which usually circumscribes analyses to the confines of drug market activities. It was only through a minority perspective that I was able to obtain a more intricate and nuanced account of the key factors underpinning Vietnamese women’s involvement in the illicit drug trade.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusion: A ‘minority perspective’ on drug trafficking

This thesis was primarily driven by the objective to redress the empirical gap in knowledge on drug traffickers that currently plagues illicit drugs research worldwide. An important first step in achieving this objective was to reposition drug traffickers from the margins of research to the forefront of analysis. In order to generate an ‘alternative, critical understanding’ (Bourgois, 1995: 12) of drug traffickers – one that is not predicated on ‘influential myths’ (Denton, 2001: 4) and ‘apparently commonsense assumptions’ (Fleetwood, 2011: 375) – it was imperative that the present research privileged drug traffickers’ perspectives by allowing their voices to be heard. Approaching the analysis from this standpoint has thus firmly positioned this thesis within a long line of sociological studies that conceives the individual’s ‘lived experience’ as a crucial starting point from which to adequately address key social issues (see for example, Bourgois, 2003; Maher, 1997).

This study is the first of its kind to empirically investigate the key factors and circumstances that drive Vietnamese women’s participation in Australia’s illicit drug markets as cultivators, importers or distributors. Specifically, my analysis into the lives of 35 Vietnamese women incarcerated for drug crimes in Melbourne, Australia, highlights three important themes in relation to illicit drug markets. First, it has shown how ‘minority perspectives’ build a richer understanding of pathways into illicit drug markets by ethnic and immigrant minorities (Phillips & Bowling, 2003: 270). Second, it demonstrates the importance of understanding drug trafficking activities within specific local contexts – which, in this study, includes certain physical and social spaces in and around the urban city of Melbourne, Australia. Doing so allows this thesis to conceptually move out of a simplistic binary between determinist structuralist and individualistic accounts. Moreover, it allows the analysis to take on more nuanced and sophisticated accounts of how broader structural forces express themselves in the day-to-day practices of individuals’ lives, rather than existing ‘outside the contextual field’ (Duff, 2007: 507).

By situating the analysis within a specific localised context, I was able to identify the close association between illicit drug markets and gambling – an association largely overlooked in the academic literature to date. Further to this, this study also draws attention to the interface between ethnicity and gender and how this intersects with the broader social, economic and cultural structures to influence Vietnamese women's decisions to work in the illicit drug trade. In this final chapter, I draw together the main findings and key arguments of the thesis before concluding with final reflections on the theoretical and policy implications of this research.

8.1 A minority perspective on the motives for drug trafficking

Building on Phillips and Bowling's (2003) call for a 'minority perspective' as the starting point for analysis, this thesis unravels a complex interplay of historical, cultural, social and economic factors that shaped participants' pathways into the illicit drug trade. Such a multidimensional interpretation of Australia's drug problem, particularly among its Vietnamese population, would have been overlooked from a neoliberal model of drug trafficking for two key reasons: first, a market-oriented approach towards the study of drug trafficking has typically represented drug traffickers through 'undifferentiated categorised descriptions' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010a: 89) such as 'Black' or 'Asian' (Garland et al., 2006: 424). Secondly, a neoliberal account – which understands drug trafficking as a commodity trade grounded in 'risks and prices' – assumes that all drug traffickers are single-mindedly motivated by the rational pursuit of pecuniary success. From this standpoint, movement into the drug trade 'entails calculating and weighing up risks of detection, capture and punishment on the one hand, against the material rewards, benefits and satisfactions to be reaped from seizing the opportunity to commit the crime on the other' (Davies, 2003: 295). Empirical findings from the present research challenge such rational choice assumptions.

This thesis does not deny the economic dimension of the drug problem given that four of the five categories of motives identified by the present study *were* directly about money. However, to just simply state that those participants were driven by 'money' without providing any context to such claims would have been a superficial assessment of their lived reality. This study found that participants' motives were deeply embedded

within a cultural and social context that reflected 'specific problems and concerns' (Garland et al., 2006: 424) currently affecting the lives of many Vietnamese people in Australia. In addition to this, initiation into and continued involvement in the drug trade was heavily influenced by circumstances that demanded participants' moral obligations and loyalty over and above considerations delineated by the neoliberal driven 'risks and prices' model. In this respect, knowledge of participants' social and cultural worlds held far greater explanatory power in understanding their involvement.

8.1.1 Playing the game: gambling and the informal banking scheme of 'chơi hụi'

As highlighted in Chapter Five, more than half of the participants in this study joined the drugs pathway in a desperate bid to resolve debts incurred through casino gambling. Three reasons were identified for going to the casino. The first reason was to socialise and escape personal problems at home. The second reason was to make extra money and the third reason was to recover their partner's gambling losses. Consistent with the traditional Vietnamese custom of keeping family matters private in order to avoid 'losing face', attending the casino was an attempt to take matters into their own hands. As Phúc explained, 'the casino makes you happy and helps you to forget about your problems'. Furthermore, while participants' limited English skills played a considerable part in restricting their ability to engage in other recreational activities, most perceived the casino as one of very few socially acceptable venues where Vietnamese women could attend alone – as Nguyệt rhetorically claimed – 'Think about it, here in Australia, where else can us Vietnamese women go out!'

Given that the Vietnamese population has long been associated with casino gambling since its deregulation in Australia in the mid-1990s (Hallebone, 1997; Tran, 2000), the identification of problem gambling among many of the Vietnamese women in this study is not a new discovery. Taking on Duff's theoretical framework of the 'risk and enabling environment', it becomes clear that the casino – as a discrete physical and social urban space – has many enabling characteristics that support 'affective and relational processes', particularly in terms of how it enhances the experience of 'health and wellbeing, resiliency and self-efficacy' (2009: 205). Many of the women described their initial experience of the casino as being extremely positive. Not only did the casino serve as a distinct 'recreational and leisure pastime' (Duff, 2009: 205) that connected

the women to other Vietnamese people, it was also a space that provided temporary reprieve from personal painful issues such as marital conflict or grieving the loss of a loved one. On the flipside, however, the casino also comprises 'relations of risk and danger' (Duff, 2009: 203) – namely, problem gambling and its relationship to illicit drug markets.

This study is the first to articulate and draw out the connection between problem gambling and illicit drug markets in Australia. Specifically, it revealed that the pathway from casino gambling to drug trafficking was facilitated by the informal lending and borrowing of money that commonly occurred between Vietnamese men and women at the casino. Whereas media reports frame these casino lenders as 'loan sharks', participants described them as 'friends', who provided them with help in difficult circumstances. When participants could no longer manage their gambling debts, they reached a point where these desperate circumstances called for alternative ways of generating income.

This thesis observed two distinct entry points through which participants in the gambling cohort joined the drugs pathway: the first group consisted of 'conscripts', who were 'forced' into the illicit drug trade by their lenders through the use of threats and intimidation tactics. The second group consisted of 'volunteers' who initiated their own entry into the drugs pathway through 'friends from the casino' other than their lenders. While the conscripts joined the drugs pathway under more traumatic circumstances than the volunteers, it was evident that both groups were initiated into drug trafficking under constrained circumstances. In this context, moral obligations to honour their debts, combined with the fear of retribution from casino lenders took precedence over any risks associated with police detection and arrest.

A further issue that heavily influenced several participants' decisions to become involved in the drug trade pertains to the Vietnamese institution of informal banking known as *chơi hụi* ['the game of borrowing']. This study demonstrates that for participants in the gambling cohort, it was cultural familiarity with *chơi hụi* that largely explains their willingness to enter into loans with casino lenders in the first place. As described in Chapter Two, the operation of *chơi hụi* usually involves a syndicate consisting of family and friends numbering from 4 and 30 who meet weekly or monthly to make a contribution to a common fund. Each time they meet, a member from the

syndicate borrows money from the fund and is required to repay the loan with interest which then goes into the pool of funds (Portes & Haller, 2005; Thomas, 1999). A recurring theme across participants' narratives was the detrimental effects associated with *chơi hụi*. Many participants had routinely partaken in this popular informal banking system, with some having organised and facilitated a 'big' *hụi* syndicate themselves. As the organisers of the syndicate, participants, along with their families, were placed under great financial stress when members of the syndicate 'took off with the money'. Consequently, these participants 'had to take on the responsibility to pay everyone else back'. The present findings echo Tran's (2000) own observation of the negative consequences associated with this informal style of community banking.

Echoing the trajectory of all other participants who were confronted with a financial debt, the illicit drug trade was perceived as the only viable alternative to resolve their *hụi* debts after having exhausted all other avenues including 'selling our house'. While *chơi hụi* has the benefit of allowing Vietnamese people to 'amass a large amount of cash in a short time' (Thomas, 1999: 126) – cash that would have otherwise been unattainable through formal institutions – this study clearly highlights the serious implications and risks associated with such informal income generating practices.

8.1.2 Family solidarity, moral obligations and filial piety

A minority perspective on the drug problem has also revealed that participants' motives were intricately bound up with cultural notions that emphasise the centrality of family solidarity. Particularly in the case of participants who identified economic gain, non-gambling debt and romantic love as the key drivers for their involvement in drug trafficking, their narratives strongly reflected the interdependent nature of Vietnamese families, which commands the 'prioritisation of obligations to family members above all else, including the self' (Coupland, 2008: 103). More specifically, all but one participant reported that their decisions were primarily based on meeting the needs of significant others including parents, children and romantic partners. By highlighting familial responsibilities and the moral obligations associated with their roles of mother, daughter, wife or sister, it was evident that participants sought to legitimise their motives in the culture specific schema of family collectivism and traditional stereotypical gender roles. This last point is further supported by the observation that

during my interviews, participants would often emphasise our shared minority ethnic status and cultural worldview in an effort to seek validation for their actions. For example, participants observed: ‘You’re Vietnamese! You know how we work!’ or ‘You’re Vietnamese; you understand the Vietnamese custom’.

Narratives of motherhood were particularly pronounced among participants whose involvement in the illicit drug trade was motivated by economic gain. On the surface, the very notion of ‘drug trafficking for economic gain’ not only appears to subscribe to neo-classical economic orthodoxy, but it is also reminiscent of Merton’s strain/anomie theory – which draws heavily on the notion of blocked opportunity structures to explain why individuals choose the alternative pathway of crime. However, just as the present findings refute an all-encompassing economic interpretation of drug trafficking, they also demonstrate that a Mertonian conceptualisation of drug crimes provides little leverage in capturing the full complexity of participants’ lived experiences. Based on participants’ narratives, it is apparent that their initiation into the drug trade did not ‘serve as a queer ladder of social mobility’ (Paoli & Reuter, 2008: 23), nor did they strive to attain the dominant cultural ideal goal of economic success. In the context of this study, the motive of economic gain was primarily connected to participants’ moral duties as mothers to sufficiently provide for their children. As Dông claimed, ‘people usually say that people who sell heroin are part of the black society. Me, I’m not part of any society. I only went into this to find money to support my children’.

Narratives of filial piety – which is considered to be the ‘crux of family loyalty’ (Nguyen, 1985: 410) in Vietnamese culture – also emerged as a central theme. Several participants reported that their involvement in the drug trade was directly influenced by an intense sense of obligation to financially assist their parents who were undergoing enormous economic stress. Angela, for example, described how watching her mother struggle ‘breaks my heart’ and ‘I’ve always wanted to do something to support the family’. Participants whose parents had sent them to study in Australia as international students felt especially indebted because they ‘had used all their money to send me [to Australia] and I love [them]’. As a result of their parents’ sacrifices, participants expressed that they felt impelled to help resolve their parents’ financial debts: ‘Honestly, if my family weren’t confronted with such economic difficulties, then I don’t think I would’ve even taken this pathway’. Such narratives also strongly reflect the Vietnamese

conceptualisation of the self as 'interdependent with the surrounding context'. Moreover, it is 'the self-in-relation-to-other that is focal in individuals' experiences' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 225).

Given that the 'family provides the most important source of social identity' as well as being 'the first and last source of support for its members' (Ho, 2006: 83), several participants expressed that they became involved in the illicit drug trade for fear of jeopardising the solidarity of the family. In this context, romantic love was typically cited as the key reason for participants' movement into the illicit drug trade: 'I didn't get caught on this pathway because I didn't have any money. I was already making enough money from my own legitimate job. It's because of my husband, whatever he asked me to do and I would just do it because I loved him'. Such observations further counter the neoliberal assumption that 'money' is the 'most obvious motive' (Desroches, 2005: 53) that drives individuals' participation in the illicit drug trade.

The significance of 'the family' in shaping participants' pathway into the illicit drug trade is also powerfully exemplified in narratives of family breakdown. Not only did this study identify participants who became associated with the drug trade in order to maintain harmony within the family, it also demonstrates how disruptions to the family structure played a significant role – whether directly or indirectly – on participants' pathways into the drug trade. Almost half of the participants in this study were separated or divorced at the time of interview. In most cases, reported infidelity on the part of their husbands was the main catalyst for divorce. The Vietnamese phrase 'fed up with life [*chán đời*]' was routinely used by participants to describe their frame of mind following the breakdown of their marriages. Under these distressing circumstances, most participants first sought solace by attending the casino, which in turn led to their initial contact and further involvement in the illicit drug trade.

8.1.3 Structural, situational and environmental influences

This study reveals that while cultural values and beliefs had a powerful influence in shaping participants' decisions to work in the illicit drug trade, the circumstances that gave rise to their motives were also the result of a complex interplay of structural, environmental and situational factors. Given that most participants were unemployed

and had been on some kind of government income support for many years prior to their involvement in the illicit drug trade, it is not surprising that socioeconomic disadvantage is a central theme across most narratives. Based on the accounts of participants who came to Australia as part of the earliest wave of refugees and family reunion migrants, it is evident that most had never fully recovered from the Australian economic restructuring of the early 1990s, which involved ‘substantial contraction’ (Coughlan, 1998: 176) of jobs that made up their economic base. Whilst the majority of participants sought cash-in-hand jobs in the informal economy such as working from home as garment out-workers or fruit picking on farms in order to supplement their fixed incomes, these jobs were precarious in nature and poorly paid. As Dông pointed out, ‘I couldn’t earn a living. Life in Melbourne, the way I see it, it’s very difficult to earn money […] Things were extremely difficult. I didn’t have any money, nothing at all’. This study demonstrates that persistent experiences of economic hardships either directly shaped participants’ decisions to work in the illicit drug trade or, as discussed earlier, to participation in gambling or *chơi hụi*, which eventually propelled individuals onto the drugs pathway.

The physical environment of Melbourne’s casino played a powerful role in over half of participants’ pathways into the illicit drug trade. For example, Nguyệt exclaimed: ‘If there were no casino, then us Vietnamese people would not be so miserable!’ It was only within the context of the casino – as opposed to gambling machines in other venues such as pubs and clubs – that made it possible for these participants to encounter ‘friends’ who facilitated their gambling loans and their involvement in illicit drug markets.

This study identifies a further dimension of complexity surrounding the contemporary drug problem in Australia, which is the involvement of Vietnamese nationals in Australia’s cannabis markets. Vietnamese nationals made up almost one quarter of all participants in this study and all were involved in the urban cultivation of cannabis. Such findings appear to be part of a global trend mirrored in Britain (Silverstone & Salvage, 2010), whereby ‘new arrivals’ of Vietnamese overseas students and illegal immigrants are a ‘significant component of the networks which relate to the cannabis cultivation business’ (Silverstone & Salvage, 2010: 22). Consistent with the international data, the Vietnamese nationals in this study mostly consisted of illegal

immigrants who had initially arrived in Australia on tourist or student visas. In regard to the circumstances that gave rise to their motives, all reported that their involvement in the cannabis cultivation trade was fuelled by their family's struggling economic situation in Việt Nam. The opportunity to 'support my children in Việt Nam and [send] them to good schools' was a common justification as to why participants chose to remain in Australia illegally. Furthermore, these participants routinely located their motives within the context of economic survival in a developing country. Doing so allowed them to morally distinguish themselves from Vietnamese-Australian drug offenders, who, from their perspective, will always be in a much better economic position simply because they live in a first world country. For example, Xuân asserted, 'In Việt Nam, there is no such thing as government welfare agencies. Do you think there is such a thing as Centrelink? If you don't make money in a particular month, then there's no food and no money to send your children to school'.

To date, there is a paucity of empirical studies examining the involvement of Vietnamese nationals in the international cannabis cultivation trade. Previous accounts have predominantly relied on the knowledge of law enforcement officers but as Coomber points out, 'the problem arises when one considers exactly what these individuals actually 'know' about the drug markets' (2004: 501). While a global network in the operation of cannabis cultivation involving Vietnamese citizens may exist, such observations cannot be confirmed by the data in this study. What this thesis does argue, however, is that this new phenomenon is best understood within the broader context of globalisation as 'it leads to a [more] sophisticated reading of the intersection between drugs, crime, deprivation and ethnicity' (Seddon, 2006: 694).

One final note on motives worth noting is that while participants claimed that their involvement in drug trafficking was primarily driven by one of the five identified by this study – that is, the resolution of gambling or non-gambling related debts, economic gain, romantic love and drug dependency – it was found that such motives were not always mutually exclusive. Participants often reported overlapping and intertwined motives. For example, participants whose primary motive was to repay a family member's financial debt also reported a secondary motive of economic gain, usually in the context of provisioning for others or alleviating their own daily economic struggles. Furthermore, even though most participants emphasised that 'this was never about

greed', some candidly revealed that over time, their original motives had indeed shifted to greed. As Ai expressed, 'I was making such a lot of money. I was greedy and so I didn't want to stop. If I did stop, where would I get the money to continue living like this?' Such sentiments echo the accounts of (male) drug traffickers identified in Desroches (2005) and VanNostrand and Tewksbury's (1999) study.

8.2 Gender dynamics, ethnic networks and opportunity structures

Motives alone did not facilitate participants' entry into the illicit drug trade. Echoing Taylor's observation that 'opportunity to participate must be available' (1993: 1), this study demonstrates that inroads into Australia's illicit drug markets were primarily made possible through participants' own personal and social networks, or through networks established by gambling at Melbourne's casino. Such findings resonate with the ethnographic tradition, highlighting the social embeddedness of illicit drug markets (Bourgois, 2003; Denton & O'Malley, 1999; Dwyer, 2009). Yet the observations and insights detailed in this study are a far cry from the tight-knit and communal ties routinely reported in criminological literature on ethnic drug networks. The gender dynamics illustrated in this study also challenge prevailing dualistic portrayals of women's presence in illicit drug markets. Participants' accounts of the illicit drug trade depart not only from the 'pathology and powerless narrative' of mainstream criminology, but also from the image of 'the new female criminal' or 'gangsta bitch' (Maher, 1997: 1) commonly identified in the emancipation thesis.

The study illustrates that while the circumstances surrounding participants' familial and marital relations played a significant role in shaping their motives to become involved in the drug trade, participants' actual movement *into* the drug trade were not – for the most part – mediated by such relationships. On the contrary, most participants' kinship ties to the drug trade were thin and precarious. As highlighted earlier, more than half of the participants in this study made contact with the drug trade through 'friends' from the casino. Based on participants' narratives, although such friendships required a certain degree of trust, reputation and cooperation, they were, above all, defined by weak interpersonal relations. As Huệ declared, 'They were only friends I knew from the casino; we weren't close'. Other participants became involved in the drug trade through

friends from their own personal and social networks while only a small proportion were initiated by their romantic partners. Even when this did occur, the narratives presented by these participants did not subscribe to the dominant imagery of women drug sellers as being ‘controlled and exploited by men’ (Anderson, 2005: 374).

Access into drug distribution networks was also largely dependent upon participants’ Vietnamese ethnicity. With the exception of participants who sold heroin as an adjunct to their drug dependency (that is, user-dealers), everyone else in this study emphasised: ‘I only worked with other Vietnamese people’. This observation confirms previous research highlighting the mono-ethnic nature of drug distribution networks (Desroches, 2005; Murji, 2007; Paoli & Reuter, 2008). Crucially for participants in this study, a majority of who had low levels of English proficiency, entry into the illicit drug trade was only made possible through the shared language of Vietnamese. By implication, participants highlighted that they only socialised with other Vietnamese people: ‘It’s because our Vietnamese community only socialise with each other. If one person is doing this, then the whole group knows and they introduce each other into it’. In the context of the casino, relationships with casino lenders were facilitated by a shared cultural familiarity with the Vietnamese informal lending practice of *chơi hụi*. Participants also emphasised trust as an important factor. However, rather than being built upon emotional bonds or ‘close and long-term kin ties’ (Denton & O’Malley, 1999: 41), trust, in the context of the present study, was more broadly based on a shared cultural understanding that ‘Vietnamese people keep things to themselves’ and ‘don’t dare speak’ to the police.

In relation to the victimisation/agency debate that dominates the literature on women’s involvement in the illicit drug trade, this study highlights the futility of simply representing women drug traffickers as either agents or victims. Participants’ pathways into, and experiences within the drug trade constituted a complex interplay of choice, agency, victimisation and coercion. Additionally, discourses of victimhood and agency reflected a wide range of experiences and were seldom articulated within the context of participants’ own gendered power relations. While the role of gender certainly underpinned participants’ motives, it was rarely mentioned during participants’ accounts of their recruitment and involvement in the drug trade. Even when probed, the majority of participants did not perceive gender to be a salient feature that defined their

experiences. In this setting, shared ethnicity and culture were deemed to be more powerful influences. That said, it was found that in the context of mule-work, several participants had in fact explicitly used their identity as mothers as a strategy to either get themselves out of doing mule-work completely or to control the quantity of heroin capsules that they were willing to internally ingest. For example, Cảnh told her contact that: 'Do you want to force me to the point where I could die? What if it bursts inside my body and I die and leave behind my children?' Furthermore, while experiences of interpersonal victimisation and coercion characterised many of the participants' entry into the drug trade, such experiences were not at the hands of participants' romantic partners but rather, by informal money lenders whom participants encountered at the casino. In this respect, the present findings do not correspond with the key themes of recent scholarship on women's participation in illicit drug markets, which mostly emphasise women's sexualised roles and their subordination to their menfolk (Maher & Hudson, 2007).

Overall, this study demonstrates that when women's involvement in the illicit drug trade is understood as a process – that is, from the circumstances that drove their involvement to how they were recruited, as well as their experiences of working in the drug trade – questions concerning women's victimisation and agency become more nuanced. While participants typically framed their narratives through the victimised lens of trauma and dislocation, they also recounted multiple ways in which they were able to make active choices within such constrained circumstances. Such expressions of agency included intentionally seeking out, or voluntarily accepting offers to work in the drug trade in a desperate bid to resolve or change the conditions of their lives. Even in situations where participants described being pressured or 'conscripted' into working as a mule, crop-sitter or trafficker, their narratives were peppered with examples that drew attention to their agency. This was particularly pronounced among participants in the gambling cohort, who, despite experiencing threats and intimidation by casino lenders, emphasised that they had put themselves in that position because – as participants frequently pointed out – 'It's because I got involved in gambling at the casino'.

Where previous research has predominantly portrayed women as occupying the most victimised and marginalised roles within the drug trade (Maher, 1997), participants in this study assumed diverse roles – ranging from mules, street-based sellers and crop-

sitters at the bottom of the drug distribution chain, to coordination and supervision at more senior levels. Further, the strength of participants' interpersonal ties with the contact(s) who initiated their entry into drug distribution networks largely determined the type of roles that they performed as well as providing them scope for initiative and mobility within the network.

This thesis also highlights that visible street-based drug markets no longer dominate Australia's illicit drug trade – a trend that is echoed in most western countries around the world ' (Aitken et al., 2002; Coomber & Maher, 2006; Maher & Dixon, 1999; May & Hough, 2004). Additionally, contrary to the profile of ethnic Vietnamese contact with the drug trade in previous studies (Dwyer, 2009; Hellard et al., 2006; Higgs et al., 2008; Ho, 2006; Reid et al., 2002), the majority of participants in this study had no prior history of drug use and were not involved in drug distribution to supplement a drug dependency. This study observes that the diversification of Vietnamese drug networks into cannabis cultivation creates opportunities to recruit and attract a new wave of Vietnamese to the supply-side of Australia's drug problem. In this context, participants' perceptions of the lower risks associated with cannabis cultivation relative to the heroin trade provide valuable insight into why they were more willing to join the drugs pathway as a solution to their problems.

For some participants, cannabis was considered as only a 'soft drug', and thus, their involvement would not cause harm to society or themselves. Other participants claimed that they had only ever been exposed to the drug trade through films or the news media, and while the heroin trade was perceived to be 'associated with a lot of violence, shootings and murders', they had 'never heard anything about the cannabis trade'. For Vietnamese nationals, many reported that their contacts had also downplayed the legal risks, informing them that if caught, they would receive a 'strong warning' or in a worst-case scenario, be 'deported back to Việt Nam'.

Ultimately the participants in this study ended up in prison. In these circumstances, they seized the opportunity to tell their stories and draw lessons from their experiences. While prison-based research has been widely criticised for its limited ability to generalise to the broader population of drug traffickers, the breadth of the present study demonstrates the opposite. Speaking to prisoners in this way extends our knowledge on the pattern of drug trafficking among Vietnamese people involved across a number of

levels of the drug trade in Australia. Most importantly, prison provided access that may have been more difficult outside the prison setting. In saying that, based on the relatively small number of participants, I acknowledge that the findings from the present study cannot be generalised to *all* Vietnamese women drug traffickers. In addition, given that this research was based on one-off interviews with a particular set of women across a specific point in time, the findings are limited to representing a 'snapshot' of the issues and circumstances that shaped the women's pathways into the illicit drug trade. It is for this reason that I strongly recommend future research be carried out on Vietnamese women's growing participation in Australia's illicit drug trade in order to see whether the present findings are replicated across time.

8.3 Theoretical and Policy Implications

Much of the academic knowledge on Vietnamese involvement in Australia's illicit drug trade remains focused on drug users, particularly on the associated health risks and drug-related harms among this population. While such studies have contributed valuable knowledge to the discourse around reducing harms related to drug use, particularly as it relates to HIV prevention among injecting drug users (see for example Higgs et al., 2001; Higgs et al., 2006), this thesis illustrates that the key issues underpinning the recent growing phenomenon of Vietnamese women incarcerated for drug-related crimes are, for the most part, not related to individual drug use. Further to this, it is only through a 'qualitative engagement' (Fleetwood, 2011: 376) that this research is able to provide a detailed, nuanced account of how the Vietnamese women participants ended up working in Melbourne's illicit drug markets. As drug policies and penalty sanctions for drug trafficking – both in Australia and internationally – become increasingly reliant on 'neoliberal forms of justice' (Fleetwood, 2011: 389), never before has there been greater urgency for drugs researchers to critically evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of such policies. The rationale for doing so lies in the fact that 'conviction by numbers' (Harris, 2011: 1) has the serious potential to punish drug traffickers unjustly (Fleetwood, 2011; Hughes et al., 2014).

Where Australia has had a long history of being more sympathetic to drug users as evidenced by its harm minimisation policies and interventions, drug traffickers on the

other hand, are shown 'little mercy' (Hughes et al., 2014: 1). Fitzgerald observes that this is because 'traffickers are somewhat [perceived as] different to the suffering addict who can be rehabilitated or redeemed' (2009: 268). From this perspective, it is a far easier task to remove drug traffickers from the community and simply put them behind bars (Fitzgerald, 2009) than to deal with the complexities of their reality. Current sentencing guidelines based on legal threshold quantities provide the perfect shorthand tool for legislators and prosecutors to justify harsh sentencing of drug traffickers.

As indicated at the outset of this thesis, Australia is one of a minority of countries that specify actual legal drug quantity thresholds for determining the seriousness of drug trafficking offences (Hughes et al., 2014). However, the arbitrariness by which existing legal thresholds have been developed 'does little for public confidence in the criminal justice system' (Harris, 2011: 2). What's more, it does *not* 'guarantee that drug offenders receive the sanction that they deserve' (Hughes et al., 2014: 2). Data from the present study's interviews with incarcerated Vietnamese women drug traffickers adds further empirical weight to the growing body of literature that problematises 'the relationship between weight of drug carried and seriousness of offending' (Fleetwood, 2011: 376).

In an effort to deviate from neoliberal/rational choice models of the drug problem, most anthropological and sociological accounts– particularly ones that take on a macro political economic perspective – fall into the trap of being too abstract and vague to be translated into the policy domain. As Duff argues:

> In describing context as the product of such broad structural factors – like culture, economics and politics – these approaches frustrate efforts to accurately identify individual contexts and their constituent forces such that they might be more readily understood. (2007: 505)

To overcome this problem, this research takes its cue from more contemporary theoretical perspectives that encourage 'analytical specificity of context' (Duff, 2007: 505), which 'necessarily shifts away from abstract entities such as risk factors onto more difficult constructs such as affects, meanings and the local physical environment' (Fitzgerald, 2009: 262). It is from within this framework that this research is able to empirically illustrate the relationship between problem gambling and illicit drug

markets within the specific physical space of Melbourne's Crown casino among the Vietnamese community. Taking on a micro-perspective of space, which, in Fitzgerald's view, 'are made through the interactions of bodies, emotions and physical materials' (2009: 263), I was able to elicit a more nuanced account of how gambling at the casino facilitated the women's involvement in drug trafficking. Of particular policy and sentencing significance is that more than half of these women were coerced into drug trafficking by their debtors and thus, had no control over the quantity of drugs that were cultivated, imported or distributed. These findings echo Fleetwood's (2011) own empirical research on international cocaine trafficker. Specifically, Fleetwood observes a crucial relationship between the weight of drugs carried by professional traffickers versus drug mules – who are considered the most marginal and vulnerable in the drug trade:

> Since professional traffickers were aware of the five-kilo threshold in [UK] sentencing guidelines that is designed to punish serious offenders more heavily, most chose to carry amounts below this threshold… In other words, the more serious the offender, the more likely they are to be carrying a quantity of less than five kilos… the five-kilo threshold is not an indicator of the degree of involvement of the offender (and therefore culpability) or the length of their criminal career… if anyone stands to benefit from [threshold quantities], it would be professional traffickers. (2011: 388)

Without dismissing the obvious fact that drug trafficking *is* a serious offence, and thus, must be dealt with accordingly by the criminal justice system, data from this research, like Fleetwood's (2011), demonstrates that current drug policies and sentencing practices actually do very little to achieve their primary goal of punishing serious drug trafficking offenders. Moreover, the efficacy of current threshold quantities is ultimately contingent upon there being a direct 'relationship between seriousness and the drug and weight carried' (Fleetwood, 2011: 388), which, for the majority of women in this study, was not the case. To use Fleetwood's words, this research 'suggests that attempting to distil participation in the drug trade down to the weight carried is inherently flawed'.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that drug trafficking is a 'complex social phenomenon' (Fleetwood, 2011: 376) and it was only through a qualitative paradigm that I was able to obtain 'new insights and alternative understandings' (Taylor, 2003: 7) that moved beyond stereotypical – and often fallacious – representations of drug traffickers,

especially of ethnic minority women. By adopting ‘a minority perspective’ (Phillips & Bowling, 2003) that gives precedence to the voices of this group of women, it was revealed that the circumstances that shaped their pathways into drug trafficking were grounded in a complex web of historical, cultural, social and political structures. I have argued throughout this thesis that such a multidimensional view of drug trafficking, as well as the lives of drug traffickers, cannot be captured within the current prevailing economic paradigm that reduces all facets of the drug problem to simple prescriptions. Most importantly, the stories presented by the women in this study challenge the stereotypes that portray them as anything but ‘normal’. In fact, this thesis revealed that rather than being ‘extraordinary’, this group of women were just ‘ordinary individuals’ (Coomber, 2006: 167), who were driven to join the drugs pathway in a desperate bid to resolve, or change the difficult circumstances in their own lives.

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APPENDICES

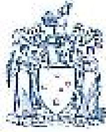
Appendix 1 Evidence of human ethics clearance for the research project

Appendix 1 includes all relevant documentation pertaining to evidence of ethics clearance for the conduct of this research. Specifically, this research required formal endorsement from Corrections Victoria (CV) and ethics clearance from the Victorian Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC). A final report was submitted on the completion of the human research activity in accordance with JHREC requirements. Swinburne University noted the JHREC ethics clearance and CV endorsement in line with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).*

Appendix 1 includes the following documentation:

(a) Formal endorsement letter from CV.
(b) Full approval letter from JHREC for the commencement of the research project.
(c) Full approval letter from JHREC for the amendment request to expand the scope of the research project.

Appendix 1(a) Endorsement letter from Corrections Victoria



Department of Justice

Corrections Victoria

Level 22
121 Exhibition Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000
Telephone (03) 8684 6600
Facsimile (03) 8684 6611
www.justice.vic.gov.au
DX 210085

20 May 2010

Our ref CD/10/194850

Professor Michael Gilding
Deputy Dean
Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218
Hawthorn VIC 3122

Dear Professor Gilding

Research Proposal - Vietnamese women imprisoned for drug trafficking

The Research and Evaluation unit has considered your application to the Department of Justice Research Ethics Committee for approval of the research project *'Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese-Australian Women Drug Couriers'*.

I am pleased to inform you that Corrections Victoria (CV) strongly supports your application as it deals with an area for which there is little or no local research available to inform correctional strategies for management of a growing prison population, namely Vietnamese born women.

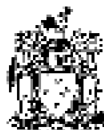
Subject to you receiving approval from the Committee, once your research is completed, you will be required to submit a summary of your final research report to the Justice Human Research Ethics Committee. The Research and Evaluation Unit of Corrections Victoria would also appreciate an electronic copy of the final report.

If you have any queries regarding this correspondence, please contact Malcolm Feiner on 8684 6517. I wish you success in your research endeavour.

Yours sincerely

Christine Nolan
Deputy Commissioner
Strategic and Financial Services
cc: Ethics Secretariat

Appendix 1(b) Ethics clearance from JHREC



Department of Justice

Human Research Ethics Committee

Level 21, 121 Exhibition Street Melbourne 3000
Telephone: (03) 8684 1514
Facsimile: (03) 8684 1525
DX210077

20 September 2010

Reference: CF/10/14955

Professor Michael GILDING
C/o Roslyn LE
Swinburne University of Technology

Re: Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese-Australian Women Drug Couriers

Dear Roslyn LE,

I am happy to inform you that the Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC) considered your response to the issues raised in relation to the project *Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese-Australian Women Drug Couriers* and granted **full approval** for the duration of the investigation. The Department of Justice reference number for this project is CF/10/14955. Please note the following requirements:

- To confirm JHREC approval sign the Undertaking form attached and provide both an electronic and hardcopy version within ten business days.
- The JHREC is to be notified immediately of any matter that arises that may affect the conduct or continuation of the approved project.
- You are required to provide an Annual Report every 12 months (if applicable) and to provide a completion report at the end of the project (see the Department of Justice Website for the forms).
- Note that for long term/ongoing projects approval is only granted for three years, after which time a completion report is to be submitted and the project renewed with a new application.
- The Department of Justice would also appreciate receiving copies of any relevant publications, papers, theses, conferences presentations or audiovisual materials that result from this research.
- All future correspondence regarding this project must be sent electronically to ethics@justice.vic.gov.au and include the reference number and the project title. Hard copies of signed documents or original correspondence are to be sent to The Secretary, JHREC, Level 21, 121 Exhibition St, Melbourne, VIC 3000.

If you have any queries regarding this application you are welcome to contact me on (03) 8684 1514 or email: ethics@justice.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Yasmine Fauzee

Appendix 1 (c) Ethics clearance from JHREC for the amendment of the research project

Department of Justice

Human Research Ethics Committee

Level 21, 121 Exhibition Street Melbourne 3000
Telephone: (03) 8684 1514
Facsimile: (03) 8684 1525
DX210077

Wednesday 27 October 2010

Reference: CF/10/14955

Professor Michael GILDING
C/o Roslyn Le
Swinburne University of Technology

Re: Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese-Australian Women Drug Couriers

Dear Roslyn Le,

The Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC) considered your request for amendment for the project *Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese-Australian Women Drug Couriers* at its meeting on Tuesday 26 October 2010 and granted **full approval for the amendment** for the duration of the investigation. The Department of Justice (DOJ) reference number for this project is CF/10/14955.

Please ensure that the JHREC is notified immediately of any matter that arises that may affect the conduct or continuation of the project. To enable the JHREC to fulfil its reporting obligations you are asked to provide an Annual Report every 12 months (if applicable) and to report on the completion of your project. Annual Report and Completion of Research forms are available on the Justice Human Research Ethics website.

All future correspondence regarding this project must be sent electronically to ethics@justice.vic.gov.au and include the DOJ reference number and the project title. Hard copies of signed documents or original correspondence may be sent to The Secretary, JHREC at: Level 21, 121 Exhibition St, Melbourne, VIC 3000.

If you have any queries regarding this application, you are welcome to contact me on (03) 8684 1514 or email: ethics@justice.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Yasmine Fauzee
Secretary,
Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 2 Explanation of the Study: Prior to Interview

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.

The Study

In Australia, there has never been any research to understand Vietnamese-Australian women who are convicted of drug trafficking – even though there is a lot of talk about the problem of drug trafficking. What I am interested in doing is listening to the stories from people like you who are in prison for trafficking illicit drugs. I would like to understand what your social and economic environments were like before you came to prison, and what were your motivations for getting involved in the illicit drug trade. I will then put the individual stories together to tell a general story about why and how people come to be involved in drug trafficking. All stories will be told from the point of view of the traffickers themselves.

The confidential nature of the study

The research does not want to identify anyone by name, or by description and so I do not want you to mention anyone's names at all. I also ask you not to disclose any information about criminal activities which has not come before the courts. Do you understand that? If I think you are being too specific I will warn you. I may need to terminate the interview if there continues to be a problem.

Confidentiality

If you agree to talk with me you will not be identified on the audio-tape or on any paper forms, or in the report (story) that I write. You also do not have to sign anything. I would like to audio-tape what you say to me because I may miss things if I have to write it all down during our talk. I guarantee that what you say will be treated as confidential. Your name or any identification numbers will not be on any tape or on any other interview material. The tape and all other material connected to this study are transported in a secure brief case and then will be held in a safe in a locked office while the study is written up. The tape and other material will be destroyed within 2 weeks of the interview.

The final report of the findings will be submitted as a PhD thesis at Swinburne University. A final report of the findings will be provided to you to read during a follow up meeting with me. This will give you the opportunity to tell me if you have any problems with the way I have reported it.

Before, during or after the interview, you can ask me any questions about the procedure. I will not give you any card with my name and phone number on it to take away because it might be awkward for you to explain to others if they see it. If you want to contact me to ask me anything after the interview you can go to …………..[Correction

Officer name] and s/he will tell you how you can contact me.

Witness to informed consent

Every researcher must show that the person they talk to is doing so willingly. So, what I will do in a moment is to ask you to say on the tape recording that you have agreed to participate – this will not identify you and you do not have to say your name. I have asked correction officer………..to witness my explanation to you and your giving of consent to be interviewed. After this the Corrections Officer will be in sight but s/he will not be able to hear what is said during our meeting.

No compulsion to answer questions or continue with the interview

At any time during the interview you can tell me that you do not want to answer certain questions, and you can also finish the interview at any time you want. I will understand and respect your wishes. There will be no problems for you if you do this and you will not be penalised in any way. I have also given the details of a counselor service to …………….[Correction Officer name] and s/he will tell you how to contact the counselor if you would like to speak to a professional following the interview.

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the study or a query that the researcher has been unable to satisfy, please contact the Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC).

Do you have any questions you want to ask me now? The meeting with me will be about 1.5-2 hours long. Are you ready to begin? YES/NO (If no, terminate meeting).

Appendix 3 Interview Guide

Risky Business: Understanding Vietnamese Women's Pathways into Australia's Illicit Drug Trade

The proposed project is a qualitative research project that emphasises the lived experiences of Vietnamese-Australian women drug traffickers. Therefore, the research methodology will emphasise the importance of eliciting the respondents' own views and feelings about their experiences.

The interview schedule is designed with the objective to generate valuable knowledge on the following areas:

- The social and economic environments surrounding Vietnamese-Australian women offenders prior to imprisonment
- The motivations for getting involved in drug trafficking
- How respondents got involved in drug trafficking
- If the opportunities for Vietnamese-Australians to enter the illicit drug tradeis shaped by, and determined by their ethnicity
  An understanding of respondents' perceptions of risk associated with drug trafficking

The following is a set of questions that will guide the researcher during the in-depth interviews with respondents:

Hi. My name is Roslyn LE (LE Thi Hong Van).

[Read informed verbal consent form].

First, I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your background.

1. In which country were you born? *If respondent was born in Australia, skip questions 2 – 8.*

2. What was family life like for you and your family in Vietnam (where you lived, family history, occupations, kin networks, day to day life etc)

Appendix 3 Interview Guide Continued

3. Can you tell me something about your education?
    - Highest level completed?

4. What changes have you experienced in family life since leaving Vietnam?

5. Could you talk a bit about your journey from Vietnam – your circumstances at departure, with whom you travelled, the passage here and your arrival? |

6. Arrival in Australia – did you live in a hostel or supported accommodation. What support networks did you engage with on arrival? How would you characterise your arrival experiences?

7. Can you tell me something about your experiences with support agencies?

8. What did you understand about Australian cultural and social life when you arrived?
9. Can you describe your early experiences of Australia?

10. Can you tell me something about the neighbourhood you lived/grew up in?

11. Can you tell me something about your family life in Australia?

12. How did you support yourself and your family – employment, finances, etc.?

Now, I would like you to tell me how you got to be here, in prison.

13. How would you describe your life circumstances (e.g. family, finances etc) prior to your involvement in drug trafficking?

Appendix 3 Interview Guide Continued

14. How did you come to be involved in drug trafficking? Were you recruited, did you join in with friends, were family members or relatives involved in the activity or did you initiate it on your own?
    - Did you get involved in drug trafficking through your friendships or relational links to individuals already involved in drug trafficking?
    - Did you know your drug trafficking contacts in other contexts (e.g. social) other than drug trafficking ?
    - Were most of the drug trafficking contacts Vietnamese?
    - Would you have gotten involved in drug trafficking with individuals who were not Vietnamese?

15. Why did you decide to get involved in trafficking drugs?

16. How has your incarceration affected you and your family?

Now, I am going to ask you a number of questions related to your assessment of the risks associated with drug trafficking

17. Were you surprised when you were caught?

18. Did you think about getting caught?

19. What did you think your chances of getting caught were?
    - How did you figure those odds?

20. What did you tell yourself about the risk of being caught that allowed you to overcome any fears of being caught?

Lastly, what do you think is important for this research to convey?