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# 'HE JUST WASN'T THE BLOKE I USED TO KNOW': SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF A BRITISH ORGANISED CRIME NETWORK

James Windle

To the author's best knowledge there have been few empirical studies on the fragmentation of organised crime groups.[1] This is not surprising when you consider that the internal dynamics of co-offending groups are largely hidden from official records and, while studies on organised crime employing direct observations and interviews are valuable, recruitment of willing participants can be difficult. Such studies can be also expensive, time consuming, potentially risky, and present ethical barriers.

As argued in the introduction to this volume, historical sources can provide an important alternative to these traditional social science methods. This chapter employs (auto)biographies as an historical source to investigate the formation and fragmentation of an organised crime network operational in Essex and London between the late-1980s and 1995. The overlapping sociological theories of trust and social capital are used to guide analysis of the historical data.

[1] Although see: S. Akhtar and N. South 'Hidden from heroin's history: Heroin use and dealing within an English Asian community-a case study', *Crime Prevention Studies*, 11, 2000, 153-178. The topic has received more attention in terrorism studies, see: J.F. Morrison, *Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organizational Splits*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

It is suggested that the network under investigation (Tuckers Firm or the Firm) fragmented when the core clique's actions and attitudes reduced their social capital with others operating within the network. This supports previous research that violence and dishonesty can be unhelpful for criminal entrepreneurs. The next section will discuss the usefulness and limitations of (auto)biographies as historical sources for the study of organised crime.

**Data limitations**

(Auto)biographies use an insider's voice[2] to provide important sources of otherwise unavailable information about professional and organised crime.[3] While (auto)biographies remain underused by criminologists, they have been used as the primary data source in a relatively small number of studies on organised crime and terrorism.[4] For the current chapter, data was collected

[2] K. Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*, London: Sage, 2001.

[3] C. Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice: Entrepreneurial opportunities and brokerage positioning in the cannabis trade', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 35(3), 2001, 203-244.

[4] F. Bovenkerk, '"Wanted: Mafia boss" - Essay on the personology of organised crime', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 33(3), 2000, 225-242; T.A. Firestone, 'Mafia memoirs: What they tell us about organized crime', *Journal of*

from three (auto)biographical accounts written by individuals within, or very close to, the inner circle of an organised crime network operational during the 1980s and early-1990s: Steve 'Nipper' Ellis, Carlton Leach and Bernard O'Mahoney.

(Auto)biographies as historical data sources present unique challenges. John Scott's 'quality control criteria' was used to assess authenticity, credibility and meaning[5] and, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos's criteria was used to identify distortions.[6] A process used by the author in previous historical research on illicit drug markets and policy.[7] While it can sometimes feel that the three authors are reiterating official versions of events or local gossip, they were

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*Contemporary Criminal Law*, 9(3), 1993, 197–220; M. McIntosh, *The Organisation of Crime*, London: McMillan, 1975; Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice'; D. Rapoport, *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, London: Frank Cass, 1987; J. Windle, 'Tuckers Firm: A case study of British organised crime', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 16(4), 2013, 382-396..

[5] J. Scott, *A Matter of Record*, Oxford: Polity, 1990.

[6] C.V. Langlois and C. Seignobos (Translated by Berry, G.G.), *An Introduction to the Study of History*, New York: Henry Holt, 1904.

[7] J. Windle, 'Harms caused by China's 1906–17 opium suppression intervention', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(5), 2013, 498-505; J. Windle, *Suppressing Illicit Opium Production: Successful Intervention in Asia and the Middle East*, London: IB Tauris, 2016.

all well situated for direct observation (although the time lag between the events and the authors writing their books may offer an important distortion). All three authors were part of, or close to, the networks inner circle. O'Mahoney and Tucker jointly ran security at a nightclub in Essex between 1993 and 1995; although he appears to have been on the periphery of the Firm's drug distribution enterprises.[8] Leach had a strong personal relationship with Tucker: they had been close friends and business partners from 1990 until Tuckers death and he was considered part of the inner circle.[9] Ellis was close friends with Tate prior to their involvement with Tuckers Firm, and also appears to have been part of the inner circle from September 1994.[10]

All authors had reason to distort the truth. They may have distorted events to prevent harm to themselves or their acquaintances, or to profit from book sales which depict a more exciting life, whilst downplaying less palatable stories. This is most visibly in all three authors frequent demonization of drug use, which a cynic might suggest is written for more conservative readers. This said, Ken Plummer suggests that (auto)biographies should not be seen as objective

[8] E. Ellis with B. O'Mahoney, *Essex Boy: Last Man Standing*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2009; T. Thompson, *Bloggs 19: The Story of the Essex Range Rover Triple Murders*, London: Warner, 2000.

[9] C. Leach, *Muscle*, Blake: London, 2003.

[10] B. O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys: A Terrifying Expose of the British Drug Scene*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2009; Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

accounts but rather, as individuals perceive events differently, they represent partial accounts which may be partially factually inaccurate. That is, 'most life story researchers would accept that we can never get at a simple, real truth about a life through a life story'.[11]

To avoid the potential bias which could result from reliance on one account, wherever possible the events in the three (auto)biographies are compared with each other, and a fourth book written by a journalist.[12] The fourth book was partly based upon interviews with Darren Nichols, a police informant who had worked with Tuckers Firm. The four accounts were also checked against media reports.

While validity checks were mainly positive the accounts conflict in at least two places. First, O'Mahoney was stabbed outside a club in which Leach provided security for. While O'Mahoney claimed to have driven directly home after the attack, Leach described O'Mahoney returning to the club after which Leach beat the assailant for him. Second, Ellis claimed that Tucker, Tate and Leach robbed a 'firm' from Canning Town of stolen traveller's cheques, during a deal brokered by Ellis. Leach, alternatively, describes Ellis (who he calls Willis) as part of the firm selling the traveller's cheques. All agree, however, that Ellis had worked as

[11] Plummer, *Documents of Life*, p.238.

[12] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

a broker between Tucker and a friend of his connected to the Canning Town Firm. While the three (auto)biographies sometimes conflict with each other, together they provide a rare insight into how an organised crime network formed and fragmented. Furthermore, the small number of conflicts coupled with the obvious animosity between O'Mahoney and Leach serve to strengthen the validity of the accounts in which all agree. That is, when agreement is reached across different accounts it is more likely that we have found something approaching the truth.

**Introducing Tuckers Firm**

Tuckers Firm operated primarily in Essex and parts of London throughout the late-1980s until the 1995 murder of three core members: Tony Tucker, Patrick Tate and Craig Rolfe.[13] This case study focuses on the activities of the Firm during the period 1990 to 1995; when Tucker first met another core member, Carlton Leach, until the fragmentation of the network following the triple murder.

Essex is a British county bordering London. Composed primarily of rural and suburban areas its criminal landscape changed dramatically over the second half of the twentieth century when East London's working class - including a small number of career criminals - began relocating there. This relocation began

[13] S. Tendler, 'Drug men "lured into gun ambush"', *The Times*, 3 September 1997.

during the post-War rebuilding of East London, but was accelerated by job losses resulting from deindustrialisation during the 1960s and early-1970s - most notable the decline of the London Docks - and the privatisation of council housing.[14] The proximity to London meant that illicit entrepreneurs living in Essex could commute to London for their criminal enterprises whilst taking advantage of Essex's long coastline and isolated farmland to smuggle and store contraband.

Tuckers Firm spanned the 'spectrum of legitimacy' by legally providing security for licensed venues, including some of Essex and London's top nightclubs, whilst taxing and protecting drug dealers, and/or selling drugs in the venues they protected.[15] Indeed, in some respects, the Firm were reacting to and profiting from another historical shift resulting from deindustrialisation: In the 1980s and 1990s many British towns and cities actively promoted alcohol based night-time economies to fill the void left by the decline in British manufacturing. The state, however, lacked the resources to effectively police the night-time

[14] Many Londoners purchased their council houses from the government at a discounted price, sold them for a large profit and then moved to the suburbs: D. Hobbs, *Lush Life: Constructing Organized Crime in the UK*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[15] See also K. Sengupta, 'Life for men who killed dealers in Essex drugs sting', *The Independent*, 21 January 1998.

economy, so surrendered governance to private security door-staff.[16] Inevitable, some door-staff, including Tuckers Firm, took advantage of the lack of state oversight and became major facilitators of crime.

As well as providing security and facilitating drug sales, Tuckers Firm used debt collection and security services to extort money from individuals and businesses. Individual members also engaged in procuring prostitution, robbing drug dealers, burglary, importation of drugs and unlawful influence.[17]

Many actors in the network identified themselves as part of the Tuckers Firm brand.[18] This self-identification is best highlighted by their social events. In December 1994 'the firm celebrated' at a London club:

> These events where the firm got together were extraordinary. Nobody connected us to us paid to get in anywhere. Nobody paid for drugs.

[16] D. Hobbs, P. Hadfield, S. Lister and S. Winlow S., *Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-Time Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Of interest, Leach, as a member of the West Ham Inter-City football hooligan firm, had started his career providing security to the burgeoning illicit raves scene of the 1980s.

[17] Windle, 'Tuckers Firm'.

[18] See Ellis, *Essex Boy*; Leach, *Muscle*; O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

> Huge bags of cocaine, Special K and ecstasy were made available to the firm and their associates. You look around the dark room, you're surrounded by 40 or more friends ...[19]

Two things are striking about this quote. First, this was essentially a Christmas party, like those thrown by legitimate companies. Second, it was thrown for the 'firm and their associates': differentiating between more and less stable members of Tuckers Firm.

This is not to suggest that Tuckers Firm was a monolithic structure with Tucker managing a group of employees. Rather it was an interlocking network of small cliques who, to different degrees, identified with and used the Tuckers Firm brand. While there was no central bureaucracy, leadership or budget, and actors drifted in and out of the network, there was a relatively stable core around which the network operated. Actors within the inner circle were connected by their relationship with Tucker (hence Tuckers Firm) and, as will be discussed below, once this core clique fell apart so too did the network.

Between 1990 and 1995 the network consisted of seven interrelated cliques. Within the network, and within each smaller clique, are identifiable 'nodal'

[19] O’Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.47.

offenders: actors who 'fulfilled an executive function'.[20] Each of the smaller cliques were composed of individuals who came together out of mutual self-interest. They were not formally recruited into these cliques, but rather all narratives describe a process of individuals drifting into their respective cliques because they were friendly with others within, or connected to, the clique. The remainder of this section will describe each individual clique.

The network revolved around the inner circle of Tony Tucker, Patrick Tate, Craig Rolfe and Carlton Leach. While Thompson refers to the three (excluding Leach) as the 'main driving force behind "the Firm"', all three (auto)biographies portray Tucker in a central, almost managerial, role. The actors within the inner circle all possessed attributes which made them useful to the network. Tucker and Leach ran legal, registered, security companies providing private security for clubs, pubs and individuals. These companies provided a stable of actors proficient in violent conflict, and opportunities to profit from illicit drug dealing within the clubs and pubs they were paid to secure.[21] Rolfe's utility appears to be in his role as Tucker's 'right hand man'. That is, he was 'happy to run around and do every mundane errand that was put before him'.[22] Tate provided a

[20] E.R. Kleemans and C.J. de Poot, 'Criminal careers in organized crime and social opportunity structure', *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(1), 2008, 69-98. p.83.

[21] Windle, 'Tuckers Firm'.

[22] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*; Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.41.

brokerage role: whilst imprisoned, Tate had cultivated many 'useful contacts'[23] which he exploited to organise the importation of cannabis and ecstasy. For example, he arranged for drugs to be imported by a group of smugglers he had met in prison, while Tucker and Rolfe administered distribution lines within the UK.[24]

Tucker and Rolfe were close friends.[25] They had met whilst buying drugs for their own recreational use.[26] There is some disagreement over how Tate and Tucker first met: Ellis claimed that Tate was introduced to Tucker and Rolfe through a mutual friend.[27] Thompson conversely claimed that Tate and Tucker had been childhood friends, and Tucker 'reinstalled' Tate into the Firm when he left prison in 1994.[28] It is possible that both accounts exhibit an element of truth: Tucker and Tate may have known each other as children and, therefore, maintained a mutual friend who re-introduced them later in life. Regardless, the pair appeared to quickly develop a mutual friendship and appreciation. Leach and Tucker had met in 1990 while Leach was shopping in Tuckers health food shop in Ilford:

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[23] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.66.

[24] Ellis, *Essex Boy*; also Tendler, 'Drug men'; Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

[25] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

[26] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

[27] Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[28] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

> There was instant mutual respect.... We were both fit, both bodybuilders and shared the same interests in life - birds, booze and parties.[29]

Leach recalls how he met most of the people he employed as door staff at a gymnasium in Stratford, East London:

> ... apart from being heavies for hire, these guys were also my best mates, people you could depend on in a crisis .... // Just about every single member of the firm had been introduced to me amid the sweaty equipment of his gym.[30]

Around the core were a number of smaller cliques, including a security firm operated by Bernard O'Mahoney, who provided security for one club, in partnership with Tucker. While he was a rather peripheral actor in terms of drug smuggling and wholesaling,[31] he collected money from drug dealers in exchange for the exclusive right to sell drugs in the club he and Tucker provided security for.[32] O'Mahoney had met Tucker whilst he had been working as security in a club frequented by Tucker and the pair 'became quite friendly'.[33]

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[29] Leach, *Muscle*, p.35.

[30] Ibid, p.45-46.

[31] Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[32] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

[33] Ibid, p.27.

O'Mahoney describes how he and Tucker taxed three small cliques of drug dealers. These cliques were run by dealer managers: Illicit entrepreneurs who paid others to store, courier and sell drugs in the pubs and clubs protected by Tucker and O'Mahoney. It appears that Tucker sold drugs to these cliques.[34] While there is minimal information about how these three cliques formed, it appears that the relationship between O'Mahoney/Tucker and the nodal offenders of the cliques were the only relationships to have formed through purely business arrangements. That is, the nodal offender of one of the cliques approached O'Mahoney and asked him if he could sell drugs in the club. O'Mahoney received the OK from Tucker and introduced them to people willing to sell drugs in the club.[35]

There is some disagreement over how Ellis fitted into the network. Ellis had met Tate whilst bodybuilding in a prison gym. Trust had been developed when Ellis helped Tate in a scam to garner favour with the prison authorities, which ended in Ellis being punished for stealing items from the canteen. Once outside of prison they remained 'firm friends'. Before their involvement with Tucker, Tate and Ellis were partners in various scams, including: the distribution of cannabis, stolen credit cards and counterfeit money, and the robbery of drug dealers. Tate

[34] O’Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

[35] Ibid.

also rented Ellis's spare room. Ellis describes how, from 1994, he was in the inner circle whilst also working with a clique of small time burglars and drug dealers.[36] Thompson describes Ellis as 'part of the furniture' who 'tagged along' everywhere the inner circle went.[37] O'Mahoney similar recalls how he 'was soon established on the scene. Everywhere the firm went, he was there'.[38]

According to Leach (although disputed by Ellis and O'Mahoney), Ellis was also part of firm of professional criminals selling stolen traveller's cheques, which Tucker wanted to buy.[39] After Ellis failed to show up to five meetings, Tucker, Tate and Rolfe burgled Ellis's flat and stole his car, before subjecting him to physical and psychological assaults:[40]

> Willis [Ellis] and his firm were marked men. The bond of friendship that had been forged between Willis [Ellis] and Pat Tate while they were in prison together was out of the window. Tony [Tucker] decided Willis must be punished for his piss-taking.[41]

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[36] Ellis, *Essex Boy*, p.31.

[37] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.53.

[38] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.94.

[39] Leach, *Muscle*.

[40] Ellis, *Essex Boy*; Leach, *Muscle*.

[41] Leach, *Muscle*, p.162.

In Ellis's conflicting account he had acted as a broker between the inner circle and a 'firm' from Canning Town (East London). The inner circle, however, decided to rob the 'Canning Town firm' rather than pay them.[42]

A crew of smugglers who Tate befriended in prison are the final clique discussed by the authors. One of the smugglers, Darren Nichols, was interviewed by Thompson[43] and, suggested that Steele and Whomes managed a group of smugglers which included Nicholls and Tate's brother Russell. Leach also claimed that he had been told by Tucker that Steele had flown consignments of cannabis from Belgium for him. Conversely, O'Mahoney and Ellis claimed that Steele and Whomes were, for the most part, legitimate and uninvolved in the Firms business. While there is an element of uncertainty about Steele and Whomes's involvement, it appears that Tate befriended Steele, Whomes and Nichols whilst in prison.[44] Nicholls refers to Tate, Steele, Whomes, himself and two other prisoners as 'like one big happy family'.[45] Steele and Tate had become particularly close friends through their wives: Tate's wife kept a horse in stables owned by Steele's wife. As an illustration of the trust that had developed between them whilst in prison, when Steele left

[42] Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[43] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*; also M. Ilyas, 'Easy money on drugs costs friends 30 months', *Birmingham Post*, 31 October, 1998.

[44] Ellis, *Essex Boy*; Leach, *Muscle*; O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

[45] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.27.

prison Tate gave him £23,000 and asked him to look after his wife: 'the person he trusted most with his money was Michael Steele'.[46] The following section will provide a theoretical foundation with which to assess the factors which initially bonded the network together and which led to its fragmentation.

**The role of social capital in organised crime networks**

All networks, whether licit or illicit, consist of individual connections. According to Robert Putnam these are created and maintained by social capital, or 'norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness' within relationships. Social capital is not only used to build relationships but also to achieve outcomes[47] and can, under certain conditions, be converted to economic capital.[48] For example, if a wholesaler trusts a retailer then they may provide drugs on credit.

There are two types of contacts: redundant and non-redundant. Redundant contacts are contacts known to several actors in a network; and the more people with access to the information the less exclusive and thus less valuable

[46] Ibid, p.88.

[47] R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, p.19.

[48] P. Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in J.G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986.

it becomes. As non-redundant contacts are known to only one actor in a network, their information can be a scarce and valuable resource, and may provide licit or illicit entrepreneurial opportunities which others are unaware of.[49] As such, holding access to useful non-redundant contacts allows some to develop a role as a broker of deals between otherwise unconnected actors. Being a broker increases the actor's value to their network and, if they keep the contact exclusive, allows them to exert control over information and resources.[50] In short, having a personality which facilities the building of social capital can be a valuable skill in criminal networks.

For social capital to thrive individuals must believe that - often unspoken - debts and obligations will be repaid,[51] and as networks are composed of the accumulated capital of their members,[52] a lack of trust and reciprocity can make a network less efficient. For licit and illicit businesses this can be costly in terms of expending resources on legal services, surveillance or insurances.[53] Of

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[49] R.S. Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

[50] Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice', p.206.

[51] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

[52] Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital'.

[53] W.W. Powell, 'Neither market nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization', in M. Barry, L. Staw and L. Cummings (eds.) *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, Middlesex: JAI Press, 1990; Putnam, Bowling Alone.

course relationships have different parameters and tolerances. An acquaintance will likely be less tolerant of repeat failures to reciprocate than a sibling or parent. A colleague may tolerate a breach of trust by one person, but not by another, or in one situation but not another. This could be for a number of reasons including the utility they bring to the network, competitiveness, the actors personality[54] or cultural norms of masculinity and honour.

Trust is therefore central to the formulation of social capital[55] and productive social networks.[56] When someone is deemed trustworthy:

> ... we implicitly mean that the probability that he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him. Correspondingly, when we say that someone is untrustworthy, we imply that the probability is low enough for us to refrain from doing so.[57]

This does not mean that the actor is necessarily deemed to be trustworthy in every situation. An old friend may be trusted to not cooperate with the police,

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[54] Powell, 'Neither market nor hierarchy'.

[55] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

[56] Powell, 'Neither market nor hierarchy'.

[57] D. Gambetta, 'Can we trust trust?', in D. Gambetta (ed.) *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p.217-218.

but equally trusted to steal from his friends. Another may be trusted to fight no matter the odds, yet untrusted to be helpful in peaceful negotiations.

Trusting someone is centred upon two actors expecting a positive outcome in an uncertain environment.[58] That is, you cannot predict with any certainty that your boss will not run away with your wages, but you trust them not to. Developing a trustworthy reputation should increase your social capital and consequently provide opportunities for profit.

This said, the importance of trust in organised criminal networks is disputed. Petrus van Duyne and colleagues suggest that much organised crime is characterised by a lack of trust.[59] While Klaus von Lampe and Per ole Johansen argue that, in certain conditions, co-offending can exist with minimal or no trust.[60] It may be that an actor's personality or position within the network allows

[58] K. von Lampe and P. ole Johansen, 'Criminal networks and trust. On the importance of expectations of loyal behaviour in criminal relations', in S. Nevala and K. Aromaa (eds.) *Organised Crime, Trafficking, Drugs*, New York: Criminal Justice Press, 2004.

[59] Cited in von Lampe and ole Johansen, 'Criminal networks and trust'.

[60] von Lampe and ole Johansen, 'Criminal networks and trust'.

them to take from others what they like through fraud or force, until they come up against an actor more able to outwit or outmuscle them.[61]

Others have alternatively argued that trust is instrumental in the development and survival of organised crime networks.[62] As criminals do not have recourse to state dispute resolution, and because networks are constantly under threat from the criminal justice system, disloyalty can have significant repercussions.[63] Additionally, within networks 'the most useful information' and finest opportunities are most often obtained from 'someone whom you have dealt with in the past and found to be reliable'.[64] Finally, there is (or should be)

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[61] L. Paoli, 'The paradoxes of organized crime', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 37(1), 2002, 51-97.

[62] Akhtar and South 'Hidden from heroin's history'; Gambetta, 'Can we trust trust?'; A. Hall and G.A Antonopoulos, '"Coke on Tick": Exploring the cocaine market in the UK through the lens of financial management', *Journal of Financial Crime*, 24(2), 2017, 181-99; J.A. Densley, *How Gangs Work*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; von Lampe and ole Johansen, 'Criminal networks and trust'; D. Zaitch, 'The ambiguity of violence, secrecy, and trust among Colombian drug entrepreneurs', *Journal of Drug Issues*, 35(1), 2005, 201-228.

[63] Paoli, 'The paradoxes of organized crime'; G. Pearson and D. Hobbs, *Middle Market Drug Distribution*, London: Home Office, 2001.

[64] Powell, 'Neither market nor hierarchy', p.305.

considerable interest in keeping a 'good thing' going. Effective offenders cooperate not only because it will yield short term financial benefits but also because the network provides the security of operating with a group of co-offenders who have proved to reliable and trustworthy,[65] and can provide a service or skill. Of course, not all are effective: organised criminal actors run a wide spectrum of experts and novices, with varying degrees of intelligence and capabilities.

Shakeel Akhtar and Nigel South, and Diego Gambetta have shown how cooperation often fails once trust breaks down, at which point recourse to violence tends to increase.[66] Violence may not necessarily be bad for business in itself, and violent reputations can be useful.[67] Excessive violence can, however, increase the probability of 'betrayal, defection, and the classic stab in the back' from within the network,[68] deter potential partners, investors and collaborators from supporting illicit venture and attract unwanted attention from the authorities.[69] And violence that comes to police attention (i.e. through witnesses, hospital visits or media attention) can make the running of an illicit

[65] Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice', p.207.

[66] Akhtar and South 'Hidden from heroin's history'; Gambetta, 'Can we trust trust?'

[67] Windle, 'Tuckers Firm'.

[68] Gambetta, 'Can we trust trust?', p.219.

[69] D. Hobbs, Lush Life.

enterprise difficult.[70] This said, the rewards of violence are often emotional or psychological rather than economically rational responses to a perceived threat.[71]

In short, the threat of coercion, especially violence, may at times be important but is not an adequate substitute for social capital. More proficient offenders will build social capital in their network through developing relationships founded upon trust and reciprocity. They will additionally build social capital with people outside of their immediate network to profit from opportunities which would not normally be made available to the actors operating around them.

**Factors bonding the network together**

Tate and Tucker were charismatic and good networkers.[72] Thompson describes how Tate's 'wit and charm made him a valuable asset'.[73] He was useful to

[70] Pearson and Hobbs, Middle Market Drug Distribution.

[71] Hobbs, Lush Life; see for example N. Hourigan, J.F. Morrison, J. Windle and A. Silke, 'Crime in Ireland north and south: Feuding gangs and profiteering paramilitaries', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 2017; J. Windle and D. Briggs, 'Going solo: The social organisation of drug dealing within a London street gang', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(9), 2015, 1170-1185.

[72] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

[73] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.129.

Tuckers Firm because of the contacts he had developed, especially those from prison. He exploited his contacts to gather consortiums of investors to finance the importation of drugs by the smuggling clique he had befriended in prison. Tate had, in short, developed a niche as a broker of information and resources which provided profitable opportunities for the inner circle.[74] Steele, as the ringleader of the smugglers, had also developed capital as a broker. While other members of the smuggling crew had access to Tate, the close relationship he had with Steele made him the primary contact point and, a guardian of information and opportunities.

Tucker had also developed a brokerage position. He had developed a large network of contacts that specialised in violence through his ownership of a security firm. Additionally, if he had not developed contacts in licensed bars and clubs there would have been fewer opportunities to tax drug dealers or sell the drugs they had imported. Tucker acted as a broker between the inner circle and O'Mahoney and Leach, who both provided yet more security staff and, for O'Mahoney at least, access to another nightclub within which drug dealers could be taxed. Both Leach and O'Mahoney acted as brokers between their security staff and others in the network. Much like the Tate/Steele relationship, others knew Leach, yet the strong friendship between Tucker and Leach meant that Tucker remained the guardian of information and opportunities.

[74] I.e. Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice'.

None of the nodal offenders (Tucker, Tate, Steele, O'Mahoney, Leach) controlled members of their respective groups: They were all free agents who drifted in and out of the individual cliques. Rather the nodal offenders had placed themselves in positions to control the information and resources that others needed. They were 'highly resourceful' social brokers which fitted in with the 'needs and wants of other participants or groups of participants'. Both Tate and Tucker made contacts which others became dependent upon. These contacts allowed them to 'achieve more control of opportunities in the network than others'.[75]

The wants and needs extended beyond networking. They also provided expertise: Tate, Tucker, Rolfe, Leach and O'Mahoney were physically imposing individuals with reputations for violence and, in the case of Tucker, a head for business. Steele and Whomes knew how to navigate boats and design smuggling equipment. This said, having skills does not in itself create opportunities: It is the development of social ties which provides opportunities to utilise individual expertise.[76] Criminal opportunities developed because key members of the network had both useful skills and had accumulated sufficient social capital to imbed themselves in social networks.

[75] Morselli, 'Structuring Mr. Nice', p.205; also Burt, *Structural Holes*.

[76] Kleemans and de Poot, 'Criminal Careers'.

The cliques within the network tended to be composed of friends (redundant contacts) who bonded through shared experiences. It appears that the nodal offenders' reputations and charisma allowed them to develop a wide variety of contacts outside of their immediate circle of friends, which they exploited for their legitimate and illegitimate enterprises. That is, the network developed through individuals having some form of valued skill and key members building sufficient social capital to embed themselves in social networks outside of their immediate cliques. The network, however, began to fragment just prior to the murder of Tate, Tucker and Rolfe. The final section hypothesises that this was due to individuals in the inner circle dissolving the social capital they had accumulated.

**The end: The importance of social capital**

Tuckers Firm fragmented after Tate, Tucker and Rolfe's murder. Leach moved away from security work to debt collecting, employing some of his former door-staff.[77] Two of the nodal offenders of the smuggler clique (Steele and Whomes) were imprisoned for the murder of Tate, Tucker and Rolfe; a third was placed into witness protection after providing evidence against Steele and Whomes. Just prior to the murder, Ellis had left Essex (after shooting Tate in the arm),

[77] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.27.

and O'Mahoney had ceased working as security in Raquels in order to distance himself from the Firm.[78]

While the immediate cause of the fragmentation of Tuckers Firm was the murder of three of its key nodal offenders, its foundation was already shaky. Drawing parallels with the work of Akhatar and South,[79] it is proposed that an untrustworthy reputation had been established by a combination of their: excessive drug consumption, generally erratic behaviour, bullying of other network actors and, robbery of suppliers and other drug dealers. They also failed to protect drug dealers operating in the clubs they provided security for, sold a batch of poor quality cannabis, and started to attract a police attention. These factors converged to weaken Tate, Tucker and Rolfe's social capital.

O'Mahoney claims that in the months leading up to the triple murder: 'Rumour, intrigue, accusation and counter accusations were creating a very unstable environment' and 'there was little solidarity in the firm now'.[80] A warning sign was when Tucker arranged a birthday party. It was attended by just 20 people. In the previous year more than 200 people had been present.[81] The party was

[78] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.174; Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[79] Akhtar and South 'Hidden from heroin's history'.

[80] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, pp.106 & 143; Also Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

[81] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

held just after Ellis had shot Tate. While Thomson hypothesises that people avoided the festivities because they feared violence,[82] an alternative explanation was that Tate, Tucker and Rolfe's social capital had been weakened by their activities and attitudes. People did not want to work or socialise with them.

All three (auto)biographies and Thompson’s account suggest that Tucker, Tate and Rolfe's increasingly heavy cocaine consumption had contributed to the erosion of trust within the network. Ellis refers to Tate as a 'drug crazed monster' and recalls how '[t]he fucking drugs, they were ruining us all'.[83] Leach similarly recalls how his friend:

> Tony [Tucker] had become a savage, a brutal man without a stop button to halt his descent into becoming a fully-fledged, uncontrollable, drug-induced psychopath.[84]

Nicholls told Thompson that Tate: 'just wasn't the bloke I used to know. He was really arrogant, noisy and right off his face on something or other'.[85] Arrogance

[82] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, also Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[83] O’Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, pp. 47 and 112; also Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[84] Leach, *Muscle*, p.163.

[85] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.55.

appears to be a central critique of Tate, Tucker and Rolfe. O'Mahoney recalls how they 'considered everyone to be a fool. They took liberties with people'.[86]

Tucker, Tate and Rolfe were 'supposed to be into robbing other villains in a big way'.[87] There are accounts of Tucker pretending to have been raided by the police midway through a deal so that he did not have to pay for the 'seized' drugs.[88] In another example, Ellis had arranged for the procurement of stolen traveller's cheques, but was betrayed by Tucker, Tate, Rolfe and Leach who attempted to steal them. Leach reports that Ellis had failed several times to meet Tucker with the traveller's cheques and, as Tucker took this as an insult, the four decided to rob Ellis.[89] If this is the case, then the robbery may have been used to send a message that Tuckers Firm would not suffer perceived disrespect, and help maintain their violent reputations whilst providing retaliation and material restitution. In short, the robbery may have had some utility.[90] It may also, however, have dissolved social capital with non-redundant contacts

[86] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.93.

[87] Leach, *Muscle*, p. 75; also Ellis, *Essex Boy*; Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

[88] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*; Thompson, *Bloggs 19*.

[89] Leach, *Muscle*.

[90] V. Topalli, R. Wright and R. Fornango, 'Drug dealers, robbery and retaliation: Vulnerability, deterrence and the contagion of violence', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 42(2), 2002, 337-351; see, for example, Windle and Briggs, 'Going solo'; Windle, 'Tuckers Firm'.

that Ellis had been cultivating, and the future opportunities they might have provided. It may have also, as suggested by Ellis, added to a growing reputation for dishonesty.[91] That is, while robbery is not uncommon in drug markets, the robbery of friends hardly enhances a reputation for honesty and reciprocity.

There were also rumours that Tucker and Rolfe had murdered a colleague, a friend of Rolfe's.[92] While they had not been linked to the murder in a police investigation, the rumours circulating within the network were sufficient to further reduce Tucker and Rolfe's social capital. Also around this time Leah Betts, the 18 year old daughter of a former police officer died after consuming ecstasy in the club protected by Tucker and O'Mahoney. Tuckers Firm were in the spotlight.

This combination of events impacted others within the network. Mark Murray, for example, was arrested for drug dealing. While Murray was supposed to be managing floor dealers, without selling drugs himself, he had been unable to recruit floor dealers:

> Murray's dealers began to shun him. They could sense the danger. The firm was being linked to everything bad and unsavoury. Rumours about

[91] Ellis, *Essex Boy*.

[92] See also The Guardian, 'The hit', *The Guardian*, 7 March 1996.

> the murder of Whitaker were rife, although the police were only treating it as a suspicious death.[93]

While rumours can have a positive impact on organised crime networks, creating images of cohesive groups which are not to be crossed,[94] the murder had simply brought the network to the attention of the police. The result was that potential dealers felt the risk had increased beyond a reasonable level and had little confidence that Tuckers Firms could protect them.[95] Indeed, the murder and Ellis robbery may have left some fearing that those they paid to protect them could harm them.

Trust was further eroded when Tuckers Firm sold a batch of poor quality cannabis. Tate used Steele's smuggling clique to import a consignment of cannabis; financed by a consortium of Tate's contacts. Steele was, however, swindled by the wholesaler in Holland who sold him poor quality cannabis, meaning that Tate was unable to return the investors outlay. The botched deal jeopardised Tate's social capital with an important cohort of non-redundant contacts: 'contacts that he'd [Tate] spent years nurturing were now thinking

[93] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*, p.106.

[94] Hobbs*, Lush Life*; also Densley, *How Gangs Work*.

[95] O'Mahoney, *Essex Boys*.

twice about dealing with him'. The sale of the dud cannabis further weakened buyers' confidence in the Firms products.[96]

Ellis suggests that the sale of the poor quality cannabis could have been an intentional response to Tate affronting Nicholls masculinity when he came to visit him in hospital:

> It is hardly surprising that Nicholls would try to rip him [Tate] off.... Nicholls felt that he should be compensated for the embarrassment that he had caused and sold Tate a shipment of dud cannabis.[97]

While this narrative conflicts with Thompson and Leach's accounts that Steele had been swindled by his supplier, it does represent another example of how Tate and Tucker had been bullying weaker members of the Firm. Another three examples are provided of bullying. First, Rolfe had to run from a house when Tate threatened to shoot him, much to Tuckers amusement.[98] Second, Ellis had 'disrespected' Tucker by making a crude comment to his mistress and by failing to sell the traveller's cheques. Tucker, Tate and Rolfe responded by subjecting him to numerous physical and psychological assaults, including robbing and vandalising his home, threatening him with a meat-cleaver and gun, stealing his

[96] Thompson, *Bloggs 19*, p.114.

[97] Ellis, *Essex Boy*, p.136.

[98] Ibid, p.43.

car, and generally placing him under intense psychological pressure. In the end, Ellis retaliated and shot Tate in the arm.[99] Finally, Tucker was dissatisfied with a 'friends' work fitting a kitchen in his home. Leach arrived at Tuckers home to find the builder 'chained up, cut and bruised, in the dog kennel with the Alsatians'. He had been locked in there 'all night and half the day… drinking and eating out of their bowls'.[100]

Accumulation of social capital strengthens networks and provides more plentiful opportunities. While Tate and Tucker were good networkers, who were able to develop a solid network around them, a convergence of events - centred upon Tucker, Tate and Rolfe's dishonesty, bullying, violence and inability to provide services - weakened the inner cores social capital to a point whereby people began to distance themselves. As isolated acts and individual strategies, the violence, bullying and dishonesty may have strengthened violent reputations, which are useful to the network. While violence against, and robbery of, enemies may have made the network more cohesive. These acts were, however, directed not at enemies but at friends and colleagues. The outcome was the fragmentation of the network, and ultimately the murder of Tucker, Tate and Rolfe.

**Conclusion**

[99] Ibid; Leach, *Muscle*.

[100] Leach, *Muscle*, p.177.

Though it is unwise to generalise from a single historical case study, the paper offers insight into why some organised crime networks may fragment and the importance of social capital for such networks. Tuckers Firm was not a hierarchal organisation, but rather a loose network of individuals and small cliques, revolving around a core clique. The network developed because a number of individuals had some form of valued expertise and nodal offenders had built sufficient social capital to embed themselves in networks outside of their immediate cliques.

While the accumulation of social capital by the nodal offenders helped in forming the network, it was their actions and attitudes which helped dissolve it. The bullying and lack of trust may have been overlooked by some if Tucker, Tate and Rolfe were providing profitable and effective services, however, poor drugs were being sold, suppliers feared being robbed, and they failed to protect drug dealers who were paying for their protection: Their reputations for dishonesty were increasingly linked to a reputation of ineffectiveness. Some actors may have disassociated themselves with Tucker, Tate and Rolfe simple due to a breakdown in personal relations as their behaviour became more erratic.

In short, the network was developed by three core nodes (Tucker, Tate and Rolfe) manoeuvring themselves into brokerage positions and building social capital with a wide range of actors. That is, they were initially trusted and liked

by members of the network, and provided reciprocal rewards. However, as association with the three core actors became viewed as increasingly less useful, less trustworthy and indeed more harmful, network members began to leave. Those that stayed because the relationship remained profitable may have left once the risk of working with the three key nodal offenders increased further. That is, people were no longer certain that they could trust the inner circle nor that the relationships were mutually rewarding.

The lesson learned from this case study are as applicable to terrorism as organised crime. To function effectively, illicit networks require social capital – reciprocal and trusting relationships. Once these break down, the network can become less effective and may eventually fragment. Security and law enforcement forces could manipulate key actors’ reputations as a means of disruption. Although, as the loss of trust often results in violence, such a course of action should not be entered into lightly.

A final lesson is that (auto)biographies can be a valid source of historical data. The limitations of any document intended for public consumption must be accounted for, especially true crime books which are intended to captivate readers with sensationalist accounts of the underworld. This said, when (auto)biographical accounts can be triangulated with other (auto)biographies or alternative sources they can offer important insights into areas which may be difficult to analyse by more traditional social science methods.