Drug trafficking stories: Everyday forms of Narco-folklore on the U.S.–Mexico border

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Abstract
The United States government’s so-called “War on Drugs” is predicated on the idea that drug consumption and drug trafficking are unequivocally harmful and dangerous activities that the country’s population will fear and reject. Yet, ethnographic findings from the U.S.–Mexico border indicate that drug trafficking has become such a common activity that it has generated its own sub-cultural style, including music and folklore. To date, anthropological studies of border drug-trafficking culture have mainly focused on narcocorridos, a genre of Mexican folk/pop music that celebrates and chronicles the drug trade and the lives of high-level traffickers. These studies provide valuable insights into the inner workings of drug organizations and the cultural context from which they emerge. However, most workers in the drug trade are not the wealthy superheroes or villains portrayed in narcocorridos. They are common people whose primary motivation for engaging in drug trafficking is economic survival. Drawing on a rich folklore about drug-trafficking that has become pervasive in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border region, this ethnographic study shows how drug commerce has become a “normal,” expectable part of everyday life. The desensitizing of the population to drug trafficking, as illustrated by everyday drug folklore, and its very mundaneness in the border region, are a direct challenge to the idea that the government is winning the “Drug War.”

Keywords: Mexico; Border; Drug-trafficking; Folklore

Introduction
Drug-traffickers and drug users are often feared and despised by mainstream society because they are associated with taboos and symbolically threaten the social status quo (Douglas, 1978; Szasz, 2003). Fitzgerald and Threadgold (2004, p. 409) state that members of drug subcultures “by virtue of being outside the social order, are labelled dirty, dangerous and taboo and further marginalized from the rights of normal citizens.” State prohibition, however, inevitably breeds illegal business opportunities (Heyman, 1999). In major drug-trafficking centres like Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, the narcotics economy is so extensive and pervasive as to become a “normal” part of daily life. That is to say that the stigma of drug-trafficking activity is lessened and transformed by sub-cultural differences, social networks (Duff, 2004, pp. 390–391; Fitzgerald & Threadgold, 2004, p. 409), and the ubiquity of the drug economy in specific regions (Molano, 2004). In such places, quotidian drug-trafficking and the stories it generates become, in De Certeau’s terms (2002), a “tactic” of everyday life.

In drug hubs on the U.S.–Mexico border, the presence of the illegal narcotics trade is reflected in how people make a living and in elements of expressive culture such as music, clothing, jewellery, and consumer items like fancy trucks and flashy, expensive homes (Marez, 2004). It is also evident in how people speak and the stories they tell about the narcotics trade. To date, because of the violence and danger associated with it, there is far less ethnographic literature on drug trafficking (e.g., Adler, 1985; Bourgois, 1995; Malkin, 2001; Morales, 1990), than there is on drug consumption (Bourgois, 2002; Duff, 2004; Curtis, 2002; Clatts, Welte, Goldsamt, & Lankenau, 2002; Maher, 2002). This article, in an effort to
Drug-trafficking folklore and culture

As Vila (2000) has shown, ethnic and other identities are constructed through narratives. This article concerns the kinds of identities and senses of self and community constructed through drug stories. Edborg (2004) analyzes the cultural persona of the drug trafficker in Mexican pop songs known as narcocorridos. The polysemic narcotraficante persona portrays drug sellers as border-crossing social bandits, tragic heroes, and daring rags-to-riches entrepreneurs (Valenzuela, 2002). Yet narcocorridos are representations of drug merchants by musicians and songwriters, some of whom may also be traffickers, but most of whom are primarily artists who do not speak from first-hand knowledge or experience (Wald, 2001). Narcocorridos are part of a pop music industry that glorifies the drug trade but through a commercialized prism and an entertainment medium far removed from everyday life. The stories presented below, to the contrary, were told by direct participants in the trade or their immediate relatives and friends. Most of these stories were recounted in workplaces and social gatherings and often by friends or relatives. I did not seek out these stories. I learned them within the normal course of my life in a U.S.–Mexico border community. Other local residents might have more such stories, others less, but few border residents could claim to be unaware of or untouched by the phenomena these stories address.

The perversiveness of drug-trafficking stories, and the strong popularity of narcocorridos, indicates the degree to which narcotics’ trafficking is accepted by the general public as a normal, unexceptional aspect of life on the U.S.–Mexico border. In spite of this, the only English language newspaper in the El Paso area, the El Paso Times, provides little coverage of the drug trade, although the Ciudad Juárez papers (El Diario and Norte) carry stories about drugs, especially bloody drug killings, almost every day. Indeed, the Cártel de Juárez, Juárez Cartel, known by some, such as Mexican journalist Eduardo Valle, as the Cárrél de El Paso/Juárez, is one of the largest drug-trafficking organizations in the world (Bowden, 2002; U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2004). The impact of the drug trade is evidenced at the El Paso federal prison, where 70% of the prisoners are drug offenders, according to a prison guard I interviewed. (Nationally, in 2004, 54% of federal prisoners were drug offenders, see Federal Bureau of Prisons Quick Facts, 2004.)

Even though the El Paso news media has chosen to minimize coverage of narcotics, local residents know that the illicit drug business is all around them. Apropos of this, Fitzgerald and Threadgold (2004, p. 416) apply the ideas of Deleuze to “make clear the ontological proximity of drug users, city and self.” Likewise border drug-trafficking stories demonstrate that traffickers, like drug-users, “may be victims, perpetrators, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters” (Fitzgerald & Threadgold, 2004, p. 416). Moreover, El Paso is largely composed of Mexican immigrants who may have suffered at the hands of U.S. border or immigration and officials and a substantial portion (perhaps 15%) of the population is undocumented (i.e., illegally in the U.S.). Within such a population there may be many who sympathize more with law-evaders than law enforcers. For example, at a small Mexican restaurant in central El Paso, I saw a gum ball machine (proceeds of which normally go to national social service campaigns) which had a sign on it saying “for the illegals who don’t have papers” (“para los ilegales que no tienen documento”). Thus, there may be a higher tolerance of drug trafficking in border communities than in the interior of the country.

Narcotics selling along the U.S.–Mexico border is a modus vivendi for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. The part-time nature of some drug-trafficking, the fact that individuals may engage in this activity for only a small portion of their lives, yet still make considerable money, may decrease the stigma of the activity in the minds of its practitioners and their peers. In an interview, a border customs inspector called drug-trafficking “a culture on the border.” In such a context, the moral and political condemnation of the narcotics trade, which emanates from the United States federal government and conservative right-wing politicians, simply does not have the same impact it has in the mainstream cultural “heartland.” In fact, some border residents I

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1 Demographic information taken from the presentation “Census, 2000 Data Conference, Making Sense of El Paso” by University of Texas–El Paso sociologist, Cheryl Howard, Ph.D. on 9/26/02.
Drug-trafficking stories tend to follow various basic storylines or plots, such as the initiation, the confession, the boast, the cautionary tale, and the horror story. Often they begin with an account of the protagonists’ arrest followed by a flashback to the events that led to it. As Martin and Stenner (2004, p. 403) point out, qualitative accounts of drug involvement are “constructed and constructive,” that is, to say that they are expressed within existing discursive frameworks and have consequences in terms of an individuals positioning within social structures of knowledge and power. In presenting these stories my intention is not to deconstruct them in order to cast blame on the storytellers or to frame them as culpable. Instead, I use the stories to illustrate a cultural process. Moreover, as Agar’s “trend theory” (2002, p. 256) proposes, if there are larger social and historical patterns that explain the emergence of particular narcotics epidemics, then there are also patterns that explain shifting public attitudes about drugs. In that sense, the pervasiveness of drug-trafficking stories on the border—a reflection of the enormity of border contraband trade—may indicate the acceptance of border residents that the drug trade is a “normal” part of life. An understanding of this subjective experience may be useful in efforts to reform drug policy to reduce the harm caused by existing government programs.

In the stories that follow, identities and details have been modified or falsified to protect the confidentiality of informants. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is strictly coincidental. The stories presented here were collected in family contexts, at parties, at work, in chance meetings on the street or in businesses, and from neighbourhoods in which I resided over a 10-year period (on the optimistic nature of ethnographic fieldwork, see Agar, 1996). They are only a small selection of the wealth of drug stories that circulate constantly in border towns. I have attempted to present a broad cross-section of mid- and low-level drug-trafficking stories, from a much larger base of drug trade narratives that I collected.
Confidentiality and trust from informants were secured through long-term acquaintance, friendship, or family ties. Approximately 40 people were interviewed. Extended participant observation in border culture, of which I am a part, formed the background ethnographic knowledge for the study. The interview data were obtained somewhat spontaneously and serendipitously in conversations (on the value of obtaining qualitative social science data serendipitously, see Stimson & Webb, 1975). The sensitivity of the subject matter precluded the use of tape recorders or on-the-spot note taking. I have presented the accounts in scaled-down, summary form to protect the confidentiality of the informants and anthropologist. The fragmentary nature of the data, however, does not dilute their overall trend, which is to demonstrate the ever-present, common character of drug trafficking in the U.S.–Mexico border society.

Border drug-trafficking stories

This section records brief summaries of drug-trafficking stories.

1. A young man’s father is in a federal penitentiary serving a long term for cocaine trafficking. He proudly shows off the clippings. He recounts a time when he was a small boy and while exploring his family’s bedroom discovered bags of white powder stacked in a closet. He opened a bag to find out what it was.

2. A high school student writes a paper about how his uncle, rather, he finds his activities amusing. Partly preoccupied with parties with his father at the comandante’s ranch. Asked about the father’s profession, the man replied “ganadero” (cattle rancher), a well-known euphemism. The man telling the story recounts it in a matter of fact way, as just a regular part of his life.

3. A man from Chihuahua met a top police commander (comandante), now deceased, who was one of the founders of the Cartel de Juárez. As a child, the man played with the commander’s children and he went to parties with his father at the comandante’s ranch. Asked about the father’s profession, the man replied “ganadero” (cattle rancher), a well-known euphemism. The man telling the story recounts it in a matter of fact way, as just a regular part of his life.

4. During her second year as a teacher, a colleague at a local school gives a lecture concerned with the ethics of doing research on drug traffickers. Sometime later, students return books lent them by the teacher. She puts them on her bookshelf. Two weeks later she picks up one of the books and flips through it. She notices that one of the students had taped a packet of heroin into the middle of the book. It could be a student who sometimes nods off in class and occasionally wakes up from a nod to interject an interesting opinion. The student writes a disjointed paper for the class in which he celebrates his experiences selling, cops and shooting junk in the bathrooms of bars in Juárez and one overdose experience in which he was injected with adrenaline to revive him. The student drops out of school and returns to Mexico. She never sees him again.

5. A woman at a bar has heavily tattooed arms and talks about her experiences as an “ash-can junkie” as a teenager in the alleys of Juárez and El Paso. She also worked as a “mule” (drug courier) for many years. The woman is bright but erratic. The woman claims to have rejected her earlier life, but she may not have changed. She often disappears for long spells. She is a radical leftist and writes poetry.

6. A furnace repair man talks about growing up with the son of the founder of the drug business in northern Chihuahua. He remembers the kid being just an average child except for the bodyguards that used to pick him up from school and the fact that he lived in a large mansion with a mammoth swimming pool.

7. A man from Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico visits a friend at her house in El Paso. She is sitting on a sofa with two Moroccan friends who eye him suspiciously. The friend suddenly pulls out from under the sofa a two-kilo bag of pot, which she throws to him. She brags to him that her main job is to connect buyers and sellers at downtown nightclubs. For a while she wore her hair in an Afro and lived a bohemian lifestyle. After being busted (she eventually getting off on a technicality) and suffering emotional and financial problems, she cut her hair, began wearing dresses and other formal attire and returned to college. The last time the man saw her he asked him if he needed any.

8. A friend from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico says his cousin was deeply involved in the drug business and was deported from the U.S. for his involvement. The friend’s grandmother handled retail sales for the organization. Eventually the friend got involved after another friend asked him to store duffle bags of cocaine in his house. The friend made good money doing this for a time but quit after his connection was busted at a checkpoint in Colorado. The family sold the condominium in which he was injected with adrenaline to revive him.

9. A man’s grandfather has served about 20 years in a federal facility and has 9 years to go. His aunt, a sibling, and other relatives were also involved. He has become a born-again Christian but relishes talking about how his family used to steal cars and transport loads to a major city on the East Coast. He is repeatedly asked by his acquaintances to get back into the business, but he rebuffs them.
10. A waiter at a well-known restaurant in Juarez, while taking orders, confesses that he was deported from the U.S. for driving loads of cocaine to Los Angeles. He was paid ten thousand dollars per load. His car broke down outside of Phoenix while on a run which led to his arrest. He promises to tell the whole story if his interlocutor comes to his daughter’s quinceañera (debutante party) in El Paso. He shows little remorse. He is just sorry he got caught.

11. There is an Asian-American barker at a restaurant in Juarez. He offers to sell unlimited amounts of narguila, blanco, grisía (heroin, cocaine, cannabis) or pills. He provides his cell phone number and the phone at the house where he lives with his Mexican male lover in Juarez. Weeks later he is nowhere to be found at various restaurants and a bar where he worked for short lengths of time.

12. A woman sells heroin at nightclubs on the other side of the border. Despite being physically handicapped she sells out her product every weekend and picks up men easily because of the quality of her stuff. She feels that what she is doing is wrong but the cocaine she obtains helps her cope with her physical and emotional problems.

13. A man who works as a mechanic at a local business comes across the downtown bridge everyday from Juarez, where he lives. He brings with him bags of blanco in his mouth in a plastic bag. He sells some of the bags and uses the rest himself. He quit his job and stopped coming to El Paso after his wife, with whom he was having marital problems, called the U.S. Customs agency and reported him. He was stopped at the border crossing one day, when he had nothing on him, but the episode scared him enough that he gave up trafficking over the border.

14. A student’s aunt is in a federal facility serving a long term sentence for drug conspiracy. Her aunt was a nearly 100 years old grandmother. She at one point worked as a clerk in a retail store on the U.S. side of the border but overnight became fabulously wealthy. She continued to live in a small border town where he built a huge mansion with an expensive red tile roof. He also built a special car wash just to clean his expensive dirt bikes and ATVs. He was eventually murdered. Numerous members of the trafficking family were also killed. In some cases, relatives killed other relatives.

15. A Mexican grandmother brings small packages across the bridge each month for a man. She does not ask the man what is in the packages. She is paid large amounts of money for her services. She does not need to work because of the cash her trips provide but she takes on jobs from time to time to cover up her main source of income. She looks every inch the traditional abuela (grandmother).

16. A man’s first wife was a passionate lover who used to beat up any woman who took an interest in him. She also became a coke addict and seller. She eventually liquidated the family’s assets and ruined their business. He still has fond memories of her, however. Their son is a savant who invented a new kind of computer chip.

17. A man at a party chats about the killings in small towns outside of Juarez. The most well known member of his family worked as a clerk in a retail store on the U.S. side of the border but overnight became fabulously wealthy. He continued to live in a small border town where he built a huge mansion with an expensive red tile roof. He also built a special car wash just to clean his expensive dirt bikes and ATVs. He was eventually murdered. Numerous members of the trafficking family were also killed. In some cases, relatives killed other relatives.

18. Soon after a woman moves to El Paso, members of a famous trafficking family obtain a house near hers. She moves to an apartment in another part of the city and neighbours tell her that one of her neighbour’s apartments is actually a “stash house.” The apartment in question seems to constantly switch occupants and cars frequently come and go. Ostentatious patriotic displays and seasonal decorations appear to be a cover for the unstable situation at the apartment. One neighbour grows vines on a trellis so that his family will not see the apartment used to store narcotics. Another neighbour is sent to jail for laundering drug money. Several other neighbours work for federal anti-narcotics agencies. The stash house is never busted. It is located in a solid middle-class neighbourhood, one of the best in town. The woman moves to another part of town. She does not object to drugs on moral grounds, but is concerned about the safety of her children.

19. A good friend writes stories for a Juarez newspaper. He receives numerous death threats for writing articles about the drug trade, so he moves to El Paso. In El Paso he continues to cover crime and corruption stories and receive threats against his life.

20. A man from Alaska was recently released from a California prison after serving a 15-year term. He was impressed for rape. The gang he had been involved in had gotten into a serious conflict with another gang, which led to the rape. The man had also been a major heroin seller. His uncle used to be one of the top traffickers in west Texas until he was busted and dozens of his local businesses were confiscated. The man claims to be repentant, but he wanders nostalgic when he talks about his earlier life in the underworld.

21. A bank teller’s sister-in-law was caught with about 50 lb of methamphetamine in Arizona. His brother and sister-in-law have three children. The bank teller explains that the penalty for such an offence is an automatic federal prison sentence. The bank teller asks his brother if he is going to leave his wife. He says “maybe.” The bank teller says, “The woman’s brother was arrested also; imagine what her mother’s going through.”

22. A student e-mails another student a story about the first student’s brother-in-law, a member of a local band, who...
was busted for possession of 10 kg of cocaine near the Zaragoza international bridge in El Paso. The brother-in-law picked up a backpack with the drugs in it that was brought across the river and left for him by a "mule" from Juárez. The Border Patrol spotted the man and thought he was an undocumented immigrant sneaking into the U.S. The man was arrested and faces a federal prison sentence.

23. A colleague meets a person in a bar who tells him how her ex-boyfriend used to smuggle pot until he was busted. One man would drive a spotter car ahead of El Paso to Austin, Texas during the middle of the night. If the checkpoint by Sierra Blanca, Texas was closed, as was common in those days, the man would call a tow-truck with the dope packed in it, and the tow-truck driver would easily make it to his destination. Unfortunately, one day they miscalculated and were arrested.

24. The cousin of a student buys two pounds of cannabis and packs them in grease and drives them to California. She worries and suffers the whole trip. When she gets to a large city on the coast she tries to sell the stuff but has some difficulty. An old contact finally buys it for an amount barely sufficient to pay for the cost of the trip and the pot. She says she will never do this again, although she continues to adamantly oppose U.S. drug policy.

25. An older woman rents an apartment. She is told by the apartment owner that the next door neighbour is a known trafficker. This is later confirmed to the older woman by a federal agent who knows her son.

26. Several friends who attend a local evangelical church worship with three agents in the "War on Drugs." Their children go to a private school attended by a number of offspring of major Mexican drug cartel leaders.

Analyzing drug trafficking stories

This section provides a preliminary analysis of main features of the preceding drug stories. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the ubiquity and range of drug folklore, to map out the variety of drug-trafficking experiences along the border. Space limitations preclude an in-depth analysis of each account. A more detailed presentation and analysis of individual stories will be provided in a future article.

According to (Edberg, 2004, pp. 120-121), the drug-trafficker persona in narcocorridos derives its power from: (1) the juxtaposition of poverty and wealth on the U.S.-Mexico border; (2) racial and class hierarchies in Mexico; (3) cross border conflicts; (4) Mexican personalismo, i.e., individual-centered agency and power; and (5) images of northern Mexican machismo. The stories presented in abbreviated form above spring from and contain some of the social elements identified by Edberg in his study of narcocorridos.

Yet their impetus and significance are quite different given that they are recounted not as part of a highly self-conscious musical/entertainment performance genre but as daily conversation. While occasionally the stories expressed ideas of resistance to unjust drug laws or conditions of economic oppression (e.g., stories 8, 24, 28) more often the drug-trafficking accounts I collected focused on and expressed personal psychological problems and economic issues (stories 4, 7, 10, 12) rather than social ones (cf., Bourgois, 1995, p. 54). Yet, like the conspiracy theories studied by West and Sanders (2003), drug stories are a way average people reach "alternative understandings" rather than those provided them by the official (in this case, anti-drug) script (stories 2, 3, 5, 14).

The most common motive for telling the stories appeared to be to boast about the teller’s knowledge or personal exploits (stories 1, 6, 20, 23). (Boasting is also a key feature of narcocorridos and corridos.) Hence, for the example, the teller of story eight was very proud of his ability to break what he considered unfair laws and make some easy money in the process. He felt no guilt about his actions whatsoever.

A second major motive was a sense of shame, guilt or fear about the consequences of one’s actions or about those of others (stories 9, 13, 18, 29). Thus, storyteller twenty-one discusses how an in-law’s arrest on narcotics charges is likely to tear apart his family. Often the stories displayed considerable ambivalence: the speakers were both proud and ashamed of their actions and the telling of the tale were an attempt at self-revelation and self-understanding (stories 5, 9, 14, 20). For example, storyteller nine views his life as a Christian allegory of redemption, although he also enjoys entertaining an audience with titillating stories about his criminal behaviour. However, a federal prison guard who works in an El Paso facility filled with drug offenders said that the inmates constantly tell him stories about their drug trafficking experiences but almost always to brag or boast and almost never to express repentance. In fact, he said that while in the prison large numbers of drug offenders make contacts with
more powerful drug lords who help them to get back into the business when they are released. The guard also stated that although many prisoners recount to him stories of their lives in the drug trade, the most powerful capos in the prison refuse to discuss their past experiences because they continue to run their businesses while incarcerated.

These stories also evidence efforts of ordinary people to make sense of the society in which they live (stories 6, 17, 28). Additionally, they convey practical information, establish bonds between the teller and listener through emotional sharing and discussion of common experiences, comment on gritty social realities, celebrate the making of easy money, or release feelings of fear, disgust or sadness (stories 15, 19, 25, 26, 27). Stories 25–27 entail passing on information about the actions and whereabouts of drug-traffickers that can allow the listener to avoid them. The common thread of all of the stories was that they were individual accounts that were related as real life events within a context in which such activity is assumed to be covert and risky, but extremely common. In El Paso, as (Bourgois, 1995, p. 326) observed in relation to crack dealers in East Harlem, narcotics traffickers are part of mainstream society; they are “made in America,” not “exotic others.”

James Scott (1985, p. xvi) is famous for his formulation of “everyday forms of peasant resistance,” which he defines as “the prosaic but constant struggle . . . the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on.” The stories discussed here, and the activities they comment on, are “everyday forms of resistance” of a sort. That is, they reflect the efforts of average people to avoid the reach of police and anti-narcotics authorities. Yet the main motive of the story-tellers is economic survival, not political defiance. In that sense the daily motivations and actions of common drug-traffickers are more accurately described by what Heyman and I (Campbell & Heyman, 2005) elsewhere have referred to as “slantwise” behaviour. By “slantwise” we mean “actions to envision and secure necessary resources (material and symbolic) that do not intentionally and directly press claims against superordinate powerholders, even in hidden ways. At the same time, such actions also may not easily fit existing “natural” conceptions of social order and proper action. Without challenging such conceptions, they may step outside of them.”

The local folklore that emerges around everyday border drug trafficking, likewise, resembles the grassroots tradition of the “classic corrido,” the traditional folk ballad, rather than the narcocorrido mass media phenomenon (Edberg, 2004, pp. 12–103). It is also rooted in the popular cultural traditions of Mexico and the border (Limón, 1992; Paredes, 1958). The participants in border drug trafficking and tellers of drug folk stories are both Mexican and Anglo (and of other ethnic groups), though given local demography; most of the principals are of Mexican descent. Drug trafficking stories, following (Limon’s, 1992, pp. 14–15) analysis of border oral poetry, are situated in a context of tight interrelationships between the storyteller and her audience: “Whatever the considerable achievement of the individual folk poet [or teller of drug stories], the song [story] also flows from the social and back to it” (author’s insertions). In that sense drug-trafficking stories fill the place taken in earlier Mexican and border folklore by cultural icons such as La Llorona, El Chamuco, and revolutionary soldiers in the armies of Pancho Villa, as well as the subjects of more mundane folk stories about the daily events of domestic, religious, agricultural, commercial and social life.

Like earlier forms of Mexican and border folklore in small towns and colonias populares (poor, working-class neighbourhoods), El Paso/Juárez drug-trafficking stories I recorded are replete with details of local and personal relevance, not the pop drug trivia about narco celebrities or comments on national political issues and actors that are common elements of narcocorridos. Additionally, everyday drug stories express an ethos of desire similar to that of the German factory workers discussed by Barrington Moore (1978). The German workers, rather than hoping for political utopias or great monetary wealth, dreamed of making small improvements and eliminating pain and suffering from their daily lives. I would argue that similarly modest dreams, rather than the extreme hedonism and materialism of high-level drug dealers studied by Adler (1985), motivate many of the common participants in the local drug economy, who see themselves less as heroic figures than as normal people just trying to make a living. That is, they are typical members of society rather than extreme deviants (cf., Adler, 1985, pp. 1–10). Their prosaic needs and wants, which cannot be easily, satisfied through the formal economy draw them into the narco world. In their stories, they tell about private lives that are easily recognizable to listeners who have engaged in similar activities and who have heard many such stories. The telling of drug stories becomes a standard feature of social gatherings including birthday parties, quinceañeras, friends drinking in bars, and groups of people hanging out or spending time with their families. In Heyman and Smart’s terms, these storytellers participate in “illegal networks,” i.e., complex, culturally rooted social webs of support and tolerance (Heyman & Smart, 1999, p. 17).

This social reality includes many women, as well as men, although few statistics are available. Women have also occasionally been the subjects of narcocorridos such as “Camelia la Tejana.” In about 25% of the stories presented in this article, women were the principal actors. Yet even when women are not the actual traffickers, their lives are deeply affected by this activity as spouses, sisters, mothers, etc. When a husband is busted for drugs, the wife must provide for and take care of the children. My female informants tended to emphasize the role of the children. My female informants tended to emphasize the role of the children. My female informants tended to emphasize the role of the children.
destitute in El Paso after the drug lord is killed. Some capos
even go so far as to take out large insurance policies in their
names, in order to protect their families, knowing that they are
likely to be killed. This agent also told me that one particular
insurance company had dealt with many drug traffickers.

Conclusion

Whether told by males or females the pervasiveness of these
stories and the way they are recounted in border commu-
nities shows that for the border population, drug trafficking is a
tacitly tolerated activity or a mundane, everyday phenomenon
that, though not fully accepted, is not considered a radically
deviant or unusual lifestyle. Drug traffickers are students in
high schools and colleges, manual labourers, grandparents,
shoppers and clerks in stores, waiters, teachers, and govern-
ment employees. They are our neighbours, sons, mothers,
cousins, friends and co-workers. They are everywhere. An
understanding of drug folklore, the actors who tell drug sto-
radies and the participants in the events described can help us
rethink existing policies. The very commonplace reality of
drug trading and storytelling on the border are a direct chal-
lenge to the U.S. government’s claims to be winning a “War
on Drugs.”

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