

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGH-STAKES ILLEGAL DRUG TRANSACTIONS

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We draw from aspects of Black's theory of conflict management to (1) provide a description of the types of disputes occurring at the highest levels of the drug trade and (2) examine whether conflicts that end in violence differed from those that found a peaceful resolution. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyse 33 incidents of smuggling transaction failures at the highest levels of the cocaine trade in the Netherlands. The results show that outcomes were determined by the way in which conflicts arose; lost product due to negligence and fraud increased the likelihood of violence. The fragile equilibrium between peaceful or violent resolution depended on whether the guilty party accepted blame or provided evidence that could account for losses.

Key Words: conflict management, illegal drug markets, cocaine, violence.

Introduction

Smuggling cocaine is a risky business. Those involved face threats not only from law enforcement agencies but also from competitors, anxious to steal their shipments, suborn their agents and bribe away their corrupt protectors. But what is striking is that drug market violence is relatively rare. In most settings, the trade seems quite peaceable; the internal dynamics of drug smuggling generate few incidents of violence, let alone homicide (e.g. [Coomber 2015](#); [Reuter 2016](#)). Even in the United States, with the easy availability of firearms and a large drug trade, traditionally there have been a relatively modest number of drug-related homicides.¹ Similarly, despite its central role in the cocaine importation sector for Western Europe, the Netherlands has experienced relatively few drug-trafficking-related homicides.^{2,3} Drug market participants appear to be motivated to find peaceful solutions when conflicts arise and recognize that violence

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¹No estimates, either official or unofficial, are reported on drug-related homicides. However the large decline in total homicide in the United States since the early 1990s is routinely asserted to be heavily influenced by reductions in drug-related violence; see [Blumstein and Wallman \(2005\)](#).

²We note an exception starting in 2012 (just after our data was collected) and continuing till 2020. A dispute initiated by the disappearance of 200 kg of cocaine has resulted in a slow but extended conflict, generating dozens of victims. However, it appears that many of the more recent murders are no longer related to the original cocaine transaction but are about who has the most power, old conflicts resurfacing, new groups seeing a chance taking over and the availability of disadvantaged youngsters who are willing to act as hitmen (and getting killed as soon as they played out their role). Furthermore, it also appears that a predominant number of (near) fatal shootings were carried out on the orders of one particular individual.

³According to the Dutch Research and Documentation Centre, around 20–30 contract killings are carried out in the Netherlands annually ([Van Gestel and Verhoeven 2017](#)).

is generally bad for business (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Jacques and Wright 2008; Dickinson 2017).

Then, what may help explain a grievance that ends up in violence, over another one handled in a non-violent way? Often inspired by the theoretical work of Donald Black (1983; 1998a) on conflict management, a small group of scholars has begun to provide answers to this question (Topalli 2002; Philipps 2003; Jacques and Wright 2008; Jacques 2010; Morselli *et al.* 2017). Key to this body of work is the recognition that not all grievances lead to violence and that it is important, theoretically and empirically, to consider both violent and non-violent outcomes to grievances (Jacques and Wright 2008). Black's theory of conflict management provides a framework with which to approach both violent and non-violent responses to conflict, as well as the mechanisms (or the 'social geometry') that help explain the nature of the outcome.

In this paper, we use the framework as guidance to assess how 33 grievances that occurred between cocaine traffickers at the highest levels of the trade unfolded. Although there are important exceptions (Phillips 2003), much of the criminological work in this area has been undertaken with active, street offenders, self-reporting conflictual situations in which they were involved (Topalli 2002; Jacques and Wright 2008; 2011; Jacques 2010; Moeller and Sandburg 2017). This body of research brought extremely valuable and rare insights into the street subculture and how conflicts are handled at that level. Yet, an important missing piece from the extant literature is consideration for grievances occurring at higher market levels, where the financial stakes involved in transactions are much greater (Reuter and Haaga 1989; Desroches 2005; Decker and Chapman 2008; Bouchard and Ouellet 2011). A failed transaction or a missing multi-kilo shipment can implicate extremely large financial losses, which may influence the way conflicts are managed and their outcome (Reuter 2016). We expect that the level of tolerance for errors and frauds may be lower for these types of transactions than the generally cooperative behaviour seen at lower levels (Jacques and Wright 2008; 2011; Moeller and Sandburg 2017). It may also be that adversarial modes of conflict management are similarly rare; they could simply be more lethal, when chosen.

In this study, we draw from a sample of 33 conflictual events among traffickers involved in international cocaine smuggling to examine the role of socio-structural factors in determining how the conflicts were handled. All of these events came to the attention of the police, but only a minority of them led to a violent resolution. Is there something distinctive about the conflicts that terminated in violence that allow us to differentiate them from others that were handled in a peaceful way?

The central idea of Black's theory of conflict management is that the social structure of a conflict predicts the way it will be handled by participants. Black's unit of analysis is neither the individual nor the group but the event (i.e. the conflict) itself (Black 1998b). When referring to social structure of the conflict, Black has five elements in mind: (1) the relational distance between parties (the amount and intensity of social interactions between them), (2) their functional dependence (how much can they survive without one another), (3) status equality (do they share the same social status?), (4) immobility (how close in physical space are the two parties?) and (5) cultural distance (how much cultural similarities do they share?). Violence is assumed to increase when parties are socially and culturally distant, when they are functionally independent of another, when they live or work in close proximity and when they do not share the same social status. Our data allow us to reliably measure both social and cultural distance

between parties. In Phillips' (2003) key test of Black's theory on 68 matched pair of conflicts among a mixed group of inmates, relational distance emerged as a strong predictor of violent retaliation. Cultural distance could not be tested as the vast majority of conflicts were intra-racial.

In applying this framework to conflicts at high levels of the drug trade, we extend Jacques and Wright's theory of retaliation in retail drug markets to the wholesale level. Like them, we are puzzled by the lack of theorization on the conditions necessary to determine when a dispute ends up in violence, and another is resolved by other, non-violent means. A non-trivial departure from this prior work is our focus on conflicts among high-level traffickers. This subset of drug market participants may have higher levels of self-control than others (Bouchard and Ouellet 2011), which may influence how they negotiate conflictual situations. Importantly, transaction failures have more serious financial implications at the wholesale level, which may change the usual calculus for use of violence as an option. Respectability (higher social status as it pertains to one's moral reputation) is key to Black's theory of conflict management and has been shown to be inversely related to retaliation. A better understanding of the mechanisms leading to violent outcomes has implications for violence prevention. Peaceful resolutions are an indicator of continuity between parties; typically, one or more transactions will be organized to compensate for any losses incurred. Violent outcomes, on the other hand, signal a volatile context that may engender more violence or, at the very least, generate minor shifts in the trade (e.g. updated drug routes or the fostering of new buyer-supplier relations). Recognizing the situations that are most associated with violence may thus facilitate the monitoring of drug market dynamics for violence prevention purposes.

Prior Research

One reason why some scholars emphasize the rarity of violence in drug markets is because theory suggests high levels. Many routine elements internal to drug markets are naturally associated with violent outcomes, what Goldstein (1985) labelled as 'systemic' violence. Disputes over territory, punishment for perceived or real transgressions and predatory attacks on dealers or users represent some of the common motives cited as emerging from drug marketplaces. Multiple mechanisms link violence and illegality (Reuter 1985). In the absence of formal mechanisms to settle internal management problems (e.g. a partner is suspected of embezzling funds) or external disputes (e.g. a buyer receives lower-quality drugs than expected), violence becomes one of the tools available to drug market participants.

Yet, illegal drug markets are remarkably peaceful (Jacques and Wright 2008). After all, violence is a two-edged sword for participants (Reuter 1983; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). On the one hand it protects the aggressors from being victimized; it may serve as suitable 'punishment' for fraudulent behaviour that led to financial losses. On the other hand, it discourages others from transactions with them. In markets characterized by many potential transactional partners, there are strong reasons to use violence strategically, perhaps even sparingly. Norms about the use of violence may develop that also help keep violence down.

The potential for situations to turn violent and the participants' reluctance to use it if it can be avoided creates pressure on dealers to come up with their own solutions to

manage conflicts. The specific problem at the heart of this is to better understand why some conflicts end up in violence, while others—perhaps the majority—are managed peacefully. This sort of problem invites theoretical frameworks that can help make sense of the decisions made by traffickers in specific situations. Black's theory of conflict management is an attractive model. The theory links the outcome of conflicts to the nature of the social relationship between protagonists. Violence is so inherently social that a theory centred around social distance becomes attractive and relevant.

Jacques and Wright have published several studies of informal controls in US retail markets (e.g. [Jacques 2010](#); [Jacques and Wright 2008](#); [2011](#); [2015](#)) that serve as a foundation for understanding the decisions of high-level traffickers in situations of conflicts. Jacques and Wright show that much of the retail drug market violence is not expressive but rather purposive and tactical, if not strategic. Not all disagreements are resolved through violence, since participants understand that they are operating in the context of a network of long-term relationships. Jacques and Wright focus on the concept of *retaliation*, 'the handling of a grievance by unilateral aggression' ([Black 1998a](#): 75). The provocations for grievances include 'victimizations involving fraud (e.g., fake drugs or money), theft (e.g., burglary), violence (e.g., robbery), or market-related disputes (e.g., over territory) that occur against and among drug traders' ([Jacques and Wright 2011](#): 733).

Not all retaliation is violent. For example, the response to being defrauded in a drug deal might be a retaliatory rip-off or burglary ([Jacques 2010](#): 187). [Jacques and Wright \(2008\)](#) offer a classification of retaliation: violent (which can come in two forms: violent confiscation or pure violence) and non-violent (which can involve stealth or fraud). In a subsequent article ([Jacques and Wright 2011](#)), they expand their categories of response to what they characterize now as 'deviance' from the rules, from toleration to actual retaliation. In between, retailers used avoidance (decreasing interactions with the deviant), negotiation (talking it out) and informal mediation with a third party. They illustrate the value of this classification by using data from interviews with two samples: 25 street dealers in St. Louis and 25 middle class dealers in Georgia (primarily Atlanta). Violence was chosen to protect or develop a reputation that would deter others from victimizing the respondent. On the other hand, tolerance might be chosen when the offender was a long-term partner for transactions so that it was important to maintain working relations, even at the expense of absorbing the current loss. The Jacques and Wright research dealt with drug retailing and did not consider intra-organizational disputes. Nor did it take into account uncertainty, how to deal with an adverse event which might or might not be the consequence of another participant's negligence or fraud.

Other research on the resolution of disputes in drug markets is also focussed on retailing ([Taylor 2007](#)) or a mix of retailers and distributors ([Moeller and Sandburg 2017](#)). Taylor interviewed 27 individuals who were involved in the drug trade near the time of the interview. Key to her study is the focus on the incident as unit of analysis. She managed to describe 53 incidents, 35 of which ended violently. Most of these violent incidents had to do with debts and theft. Having a weapon at hand, being egged on by friends and substance abuse increased the probability of violent behaviour.

The research on informal control in illegal markets is better developed in the United States than in Europe. Most relevant to our research is the seminal study of [Damian Zaitch \(2002; 2005; 202\)](#). Zaitch collected ethnographic data on 43 Colombians involved in cocaine trafficking in the Netherlands over the period 1996–2001. Like prior

studies on street-level dealers, Zaitch emphasizes the value of a reputation for violence in some circumstances, even if it is generally perceived as being bad for business: '[t]hey built violent reputations even against their will'. Nonetheless, one of his principal findings was that few disputes were settled by violence.

Not all studies on drug markets and conflict resolution require interviews with offenders. The Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (WODC), a criminal justice research centre for the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, periodically analyses files of closed Dutch police investigations of criminal groups. Violence was sometimes used, but criminals also opted for avoidance or gave people a chance to redeem themselves (Kleemans *et al.* 1998; 2002). Another study on Dutch criminal markets in general found that criminals would negotiate and try to find out what happened when the promised goods were not delivered (in time) or if there was a delay (or lack) of payment, especially when the parties involved had good relations prior to the conflict (Van de Bunt *et al.* 2007). Violence, on the other hand, was the preferred solution in situations when a partner became a competitor or talked to the police. No study, to our knowledge, made use of theories on conflict management to develop a systematic classification of incidents at the wholesale level or to examine the predictors associated with their outcome.

Data and Methods

The 33 incidents for this research were obtained from 31 case files on criminal enterprises that were collected for an earlier study of the cocaine market in the Netherlands, the publicly available Crime Pattern Analysis (CPA) Cocaine 2012 (Van der Laan 2012). We put in a formal request to the head of the (former) National Crime Squad (NCS) to systematically analyse these incidents and generate our own coding. The CPA cocaine uses these case files to report on the nature and scope of criminal activities in relation to the smuggling and trafficking of cocaine, the criminal organizations and people involved, the social consequences of cocaine trafficking and possible future developments. The case files contained information on risks, failures and repercussions, but this information had not been included in the CPA report. We coded these incidents based on the year in which the investigation made its major findings (seizures and arrests) followed by a letter (e.g. 2008A).

The 2012 CPA cocaine report focussed on case files in which investigations came to head in the period January 2007–October 2011. However, the research period itself stretches from 2005 to 2011 because some case files are built on incriminating evidence gathered in earlier years. The 31 case files constitute the most important case files put together by the NCS on cocaine trafficking in that timeframe, judged by the amount of cocaine involved. The 31 case files indicate the smuggling of at least 49,174 kg of cocaine. Some of the cases included cocaine seized abroad. These cases were included if the investigative reports confirmed that the cocaine was the property of, or destined for, smugglers in the Netherlands. This does not mean that the Netherlands was the final destination. Estimates of the Dutch cocaine market are very uncertain, but it is very unlikely to be as much as 5 tons per annum. This figure, compared with Dutch seizures of about 10 tons per year and nearly 50 tons of cocaine over a period of six years

looking only at the shipments involving these 31 cases, confirms that the Netherlands is an important transit country (EMCDDA/Europol 2013: 45; Van der Laan 2012).

The case files include a broad overview of the alleged criminal acts (substantiated by detailed information) and the different indicted suspects. These can range from a relatively small group of four people (2007A) up to 31 suspects (2011B). On average, a case file took 8 months of investigation by a team that might average nine or ten officers at any one time. In the criminal case files, we focussed on incidents that could potentially, or did actually, derail the trafficking of cocaine. We defined incident in a broad sense keeping it open to include all kinds of possible failures. Of course, every case file itself is testament to failure because the police discovered the trafficking operations. But it is not the incident by itself or the discovery process of the police that is our focus, but the way the ringleader dealt with setbacks. Did he give people the benefit of the doubt? Did he take violent action?

In addition to the file analysis, interviews were conducted with several investigating officers from the NCS working on cocaine smuggling. We asked them about particular details of the incidents reported in the case files and incidents in general and how these were managed by traffickers.

Advantages and Drawbacks of the Data

It is important to note that Dutch criminal investigations, compared to those in other countries, provide a great deal of 'objective' evidence on the main suspects. Most noteworthy is the use of wiretaps. Both in relative and in absolute terms, the frequency of intercepted telecommunications in the Netherlands is high. Although not every conversation was transcribed verbatim, these telecommunications provide a great deal of insight into the way criminal activities are carried out and how offenders collaborate, especially since the key individuals are always kept under close surveillance (Campana and Varese 2012). This results in fulfilling two other conditions that might be asked of the usefulness of wiretaps (Natarajan 2006; Morselli 2009; Campana and Varese 2012). First of all, the ringleaders can be heard talking quite freely in moments of stress. Although most of them are careful on the telephone, when things go wrong, and it becomes necessary to react, ringleaders throw caution to the wind (also see Morselli and Petit 2007). Second, the tapped conversations are followed over a reasonably long period of time. Most were followed for months, often during the whole period of the investigation. This gives a good insight in day-to-day affairs of the ringleader and his response when things go haywire.

It should also be noted that, in stark contrast to investigations in the United States and other countries, Dutch cases do not result in plea bargains. This is important because the prosecutor is required to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the occurrence of specific criminal matters and cannot rely on hearsay (i.e. defendants pleading guilty and naming accomplices in exchange for a quicker trial and a reduced sentence).

There are of course some drawbacks to using these specific police data. First, the information is compiled for a criminal prosecution. It, therefore, focuses on the criminal conduct of the main suspects and not such scientifically important variables as their socio-economic background. This limits the depth of our coding of Black's theory of conflict management, which requires specific coding of social

status. Excluded from the main records are also police observations and wiretaps that were not deemed necessary by the police to build a criminal case. This is typically the kind of information that could be of use to social networks analysis as it often encompasses purely social interactions (Bouchard and Malm 2016). Second, tapped conversations end up in paper form. This probably limits the nuances available to the authors as written conversations do not reflect the tone of voice in which things are said, in particular the use of irony. Third, the criminal cases focus on what happens in the Netherlands and not what happened abroad. Often the Dutch case files contain some information about the findings of foreign investigations of the suspects but not the whole picture. Fourth, it is possible that smugglers who have not been caught differ from those in the case files. However, some of the smugglers in our sample had been importing, undetected, large shipments for years; they might well be regarded as successful in their chosen occupation Reuter and Haaga 1989; Desroches 2005; Bouchard and Ouellet 2011). Despite these limitations, the 31 case files still produce a rich portrait of Dutch cocaine smuggling.

Ringleaders

In total, the close police observation of 31 criminal-trafficking operations and the extensive use of wiretaps made it possible to identify 33 incidents and the way these were handled. The 33 incidents involved 18 ringleaders. Some of them were involved in multiple incidents. The main unit of analysis for this study is the incident ($n = 33$), but it is worth mentioning a few things about the offenders involved in these incidents. All case files involved one or more ringleaders who were resident in the Netherlands. About 39 per cent of the ringleaders were of Dutch nationality. Another 25 per cent were from former or current Dutch possessions around the Caribbean (Aruba, Curacao or Suriname). About 12 per cent came from Colombia. The rest truly spanned the globe, though it is interesting that only two came from another European country (the United Kingdom). All ringleaders have been resident for some years in the Netherlands and have operations there.

Coding Scheme

We used Black's theory of conflict management and the past literature on grievances to approach the coding of the cases. We coded cases systematically so that all of these fields could be captured: type of incidents, the relationship between injured and culpable party (cultural and relational distance) and the final resolution of the grievance (violent or peaceful). We only included incidents for which it appeared that sufficient data were available to code all these fields.

- (1) *Type of incident.* Our goal was to distinguish what might be beyond the control of the individual (e.g. police interception), what could arise from a misunderstanding (quality/quantity of drugs) as opposed to incompetence (inability to get the drugs off the ship) and what would appear to be an effort to defraud (delivering less than the specified amount of money). The general coding approach but also the terminology we use in the classification were informed by prior literature on

- conflict resolution so that results could be assessed against prior literature and potentially replicated.
- (2) *Relational and cultural distance.* Relational distance was defined as whether the two parties belonged to the same organization or not. As such, conflicts were coded as being either ‘internal’ to the organization (short distance) or ‘external’ (long distance). Cultural distance, on the other hand, is coded for conflicts involving parties of the same ethnicity (short cultural distance) or parties of a different ethnicity (long distance).
 - (3) *How the grievance was resolved.* Whether or not the grievance was resolved violently is the outcome variable in this study. We coded as ‘violent’ any serious effort to bodily harm the culpable party, even if it was unsuccessful. In two incidents, the police intervened to prevent the assault or murder. Non-violent incidents were coded descriptively, e.g. compensation or bargaining about future compensation or even ignoring the violation, perhaps because the injured party did not think that the loss could reasonably have been avoided. Though our analysis focuses on the incidents, we also coded whether the group was *involved in multiple incidents*. We reasoned that being involved in multiple incidents may have had an influence on the outcome.

All co-authors coded the cases. One co-author had access to the full files. The other authors worked from English-translated extracts of the anonymized files.

Results

Types of incidents

Most of the grievances analysed involve money, whether directly (e.g. theft) or indirectly (e.g. foregone earnings from a drug seizure). Yet, we focussed our analysis on the type of situation, or behaviour, at the heart of the conflict. Our analysis of the types of incidents yielded three general categories: (1) operational breaches ($n = 9$), one or more failures in the process of importation; (2) suspected fraudulent behaviour ($n = 13$), where there is a deliberate attempt at theft or deception from one of the protagonists; (3) product losses ($n = 11$) via police confiscation or other circumstances. Operational breaches can often be perceived as negligence or incompetence by one of the protagonists but not ill intended like the fraudulent behaviours. Product losses to the hands of police would require little explanation if it was always clear that a seizure actually occurred. Transporters lose the products for other reasons that generate heated exchanges that sometimes lead to violence.

The types of provocations leading to grievances experienced by high-level traffickers had commonalities with those of retailers found in the literature but also important differences that prevented us from simply applying existing classifications. For instance, none of our cases involved disputes over territory, but many cases emerged from suspected thefts. A major difference is the scale of the thefts: retailers often fight over differences in a few grams, while the grievances of wholesalers occur over the fate of multi-kilograms of drugs. The mean quantity of cocaine lost or seized for our cases was 126 kg and the median was 8 kg, making the typical loss in hundreds of thousands of Euros. Another key difference is the first category, operational breaches, being entirely

specific to the business of drug smuggling. The issues encountered by traffickers in this category (problems clearing customs and offloading drug shipments) are far removed from those encountered on the street.

Operational breaches

Operational breaches occur when one element or step in the importing sequence goes wrong. Many of the nine operational breaches cases in our sample could be described as problems offloading the cocaine at the port of entry or getting the cocaine to the right destination. For example, a dispute occurred between a ringleader and a South American supplier after several failed attempts to make the trip to the Netherlands.

In the first attempt the ringleader's sailboat is supposed to meet another boat a few miles off the coast of Brazil for a handover (2007G). But soon things start to go wrong. One of the ringleader's crewmembers is inexperienced in handling this type of sailboat and the boat needs to be replaced. When a new meet is agreed on, the sailboat sustains some damage and becomes unseaworthy. To make sure that the deal still stands with his South American suppliers, the ringleader sends one of his operational staff members (who speaks Spanish) to Venezuela. Confidence is restored, but when the planned smuggling trip is once again aborted because of new problems with the sailing vessel, the suppliers demand a new face to face meeting. They don't believe somebody has that much bad luck. The Spanish speaking smuggler goes again to Venezuela, and is told that he can't leave the country until the cocaine is on board. He vouched for it, and as he is recorded while talking to his boss, his life is now on the line.

While the above example contains hints of violence (verbal threats), peaceful solutions can also occur in case of operational breaches.

In one case (2011A), a shipment of 54 kilos is lost because the ringleader failed to get to the container in time. The container was cleared through customs and arrived at an unknown destination. The ringleader's phone is tapped, and he is heard calling his suppliers in Colombia. He tells them that the sender made the mistake of not contacting him soon enough to tell him the container was arriving in a particular harbor. He was therefore too late in getting his operational staff in place to access the container. He emphasizes that it was not his fault, and nothing was stolen. The supplier says that he understands, but his bosses always suspect foul play if there is no police report. The matter is resolved peacefully, and the loss of the cocaine is written off. Similarly, case 2011A illustrated an operational breach because of a mislabeled container that raised suspicion during a routine check. The Dutch ringleader had copies made of the transportation documents, and was able to prove to his Colombian suppliers that they had made a mistake in the bill of lading. This was accepted, and the loss was written off.

Operational breaches can, however, also lead to violence. In one case (2008F), the ringleader used baggage handlers at Schiphol airport to smuggle drugs in suitcases. The ringleader did not press them by threats or blackmail to work for him but used monetary rewards. However, as soon as people tried to quit, they were threatened and beaten. One particular baggage handler who came to the attention of the authorities mentioned how the ringleader had made it clear that, after assaulting him, they would kill his mother if he had contacts with the police.

Suspected fraudulent behaviour

There were two types of fraudulent behaviour. Most were money related ($n = 10$), and the remainder were drug related ($n = 3$).

Money-related incidents (n = 10)

Money disputes might consist of money launderers not delivering on their promises. For instance, a ringleader got fed up with a money launderer who asked for more and more commission and whose schemes were not very successful (2009A). The ringleader suspected he was cheated out of his money and became verbally aggressive. The matter is resolved when the ringleader ordered the details of his money-laundering investments to be handed over to another launderer. Violence was avoided, as the initial launderer accepted this request and worked with the new launderer on transferring the details of his investments (i.e. shares of a company).

Financial disputes can also spin out of control. In one case, a ringleader planned the kidnapping of a certain Dutch money launderer who owed him at least 100.000 Euros (2008C). The hired kidnappers are flown in from the United Kingdom but, when the intended victim could not be found immediately, they are given orders to intimidate another person who was also indebted to the ringleader. The police interfered before things got out of hand. One of the kidnappers is arrested wearing a bullet proof vest, which suggests that he expected to encounter danger in the carrying out of his task.

Money matters do not necessarily have to involve laundering. In this example from case 2009C, a hired hitman cheated a ringleader by taking off with his advance payment without ever delivering on the murder contract:

In one case (2009C) a ringleader (who dealt in both synthetic drugs and cocaine) fell out with a close associate over compensation. According to the ringleader, his associate delivered synthetic drugs of bad quality. When the buyers wanted financial compensation, the associate directed them to the ringleader. He refuses to pay and subsequently becomes the target of a botched assassination attempt. In turn, he sends his own hitman after his former associate. The hitman, however, is untrustworthy. He pretends to be working on the assassination but is actually living the good life with the advance payment. The ringleader finds out and is furious. A few months later, the hitman and a family member are killed by unknown suspects. Because of lack of proof, the ringleader is not convicted for this crime.

Drug related (n = 3)

Fraudulent behaviour could also involve drugs instead of money. A common story is that the drugs bought could be unexpectedly (very) low quality and thus very difficult to sell. For example, one ringleader imported 20 kg but from two different sources (2007F-1). As it turned out, 12 kg were of good quality, but the other 8 kg were 'chalk'. The ringleader complains that the guy who bought the coke in Brazil should have tested the product more thoroughly. The seller is on friendly terms with the ringleader and proposes to send a specialist from Brazil to 'repair' the bad cocaine (i.e. increase its purity).

In another case (2007G), the dispute took longer to resolve. Now, the ringleader is accused by a buyer of selling 7 kg of cocaine of bad quality. He wants his money back. The ringleader tries to explain to the buyer that the money has already been spent, but he will make it up to him in other ways. The buyer wants a more concrete proposal, and the next three weeks are spent negotiating a compensation. In the end, the ringleader allows the buyer to switch some of the bad cocaine back.

Lower-quality drugs can also involve a bit of give and take. In 2010A, one buyer complains to the ringleader that he received a couple of kilograms too little. They bicker over the phone, but the ringleader agrees to give him back some of the money. Two

days later, the same buyer buys some more kilograms of cocaine. Now the ringleader complains that the payment came up short. The buyer promises to bring some money the next time they meet.

Lost product

Some conflicts arose because of the product not reaching its destination, though not for overtly deceitful reasons. We classified these product loss incidents as either coming from (1) police confiscation ($n = 5$) or not ($n = 6$). Note that it is not always clear to all parties whether the police truly confiscated the drugs, often leading to very similar discussions between traffickers until the matter can be resolved.

Lost product—police ($n = 5$)

Of course, cocaine is lost when it is intercepted by the police (2008B, 2010G and 2011A). These losses often run in hundreds of kilograms—the financial losses are very large, and the ringleaders' reaction unpredictable.

One important feature of these incidents is whether the 'accused' would be required to provide credible evidence of police action, such as a police report of an arrest or a confiscation. Only in one case (2008B) did the ringleader choose not to accept a subordinate's excuses, when the latter claimed that the police confiscated the drug shipment before he could get hold of it. However, it is unclear whether the subordinate could not get evidence of the confiscation or whether the ringleader simply tried to avert his financial losses by blaming the subordinate. Less formal evidence would also help as in 2010F, when the Dutch resident smuggler hears of a 300-kg seizure. He worries that the courier may have been helping the police but is reassured when a website reports the arrest of the courier.

When buyers and sellers were geographically far apart, proof of police confiscation had to be digitally submitted. For example, in 2008D, the police secretly removed cocaine from the container in which it had been smuggled but allowed the container to reach its destination. The recipients did not understand why the container was empty and started to blame the senders. In the end, a Colombian national who oversaw the offloading, was called back to Colombia for a face-to-face explanation. Ahead of his arrival, he had to photograph the container from which the cocaine had been removed and email it to the exporters.

Lost product—other ($n = 6$)

A different kind of problem, often resulting in losses, occurs when the drugs arrive undetected but cannot be smuggled through customs. In some cases, the financial loss associated to product losses is substantial, but it may not always be easy to put the blame on someone specific. In one case, the Dutch ringleaders made three attempts to offload the drugs from a ship in Rotterdam harbour but were unsuccessful (2010A).

Other smuggling schemes fail when subordinates are incompetent or shirking. For instance, a small loss occurred when a Colombian ringleader living in the Netherlands ordered a subordinate to travel from the Netherlands to Frankfurt in order to obtain a parcel of 4 kg of cocaine in Frankfurt (2007E). The subordinate does not want to go to Frankfurt because, a few years back, he had an outstanding arrest warrant in Germany. At the same time, he cannot say no to the ringleader, so he decides to falsely claim to the

ringleader that he is in Germany and that he cannot find the contact. The deal blows up, the cocaine suppliers are mad because of broken promises and the ringleader does not receive the cocaine resulting in a financial loss because of payments already made. In another example, a Surinamese ringleader brings in coke with pellet swallows as a sideline to importing by bulk (2007G). It turns out that one swallower produced less pellets (75) than he swallowed (125). He had lost 50 on the way over to the Netherlands. This prompts the ringleader to phone his supplier in Surinam. The supplier vouches for the reliability of the courier. What follows are three weeks of negotiating because neither party is willing to take full responsibility. The issue is resolved by agreeing on a new attempt with higher-quality cocaine.

Another ringleader encountered a slightly larger setback when a drugs courier panicked at the sight of airport security and left a suitcase full of cocaine (2007F). The ringleader does not trust the courier. He thinks he is betraying him by selling the cocaine off to somebody else. He is heard talking over the phone with his supplier about luring the courier to Bogota where they can interrogate him or maybe even kill him. The ringleaders' brother, however, keeps a cool head and is able to find out that the courier is telling the truth. This defuses the situation.

Resolution

[Table 1](#) provides the breakdown of incident characteristics by the nature of the resolution. Each row in the table can be read so that the rate of violent resolution for incidents with this characteristic can be compared to the sample as a whole. Given the small sample size, Fischer's exact test is used, which is more suitable when the expected values in any cells of a contingency table are below 5, as is the case here ([Larntz 1978](#); [Mehta et al. 1984](#)).

A total of 12 incidents, out of 33, had a violent outcome (36 per cent), which implies also that most of the incidents in our sample were resolved peacefully (64 per cent) without requiring serious violence or threats. Yet, the type of incidents was found to be significantly associated with the likelihood of a violent outcome. Specifically, we found two types of incidents that were positively associated with a violent outcome: (1) those involving a money-related fraud and (2) those involving a product loss unrelated to police involvement.

This is where the distinction between types of frauds and types of losses are so important. As can be seen in [Table 1](#) above, no incident involving drug-related frauds led to a violent outcome. Similarly, a single incident involving a product loss unrelated to police seizures involved violence; all others were handled peacefully.

No other incident characteristic was significantly associated with a violent outcome. There did not seem to be an effect of accumulation of grievances for specific groups, as ringleaders involved in more than one incident were no more likely to use violence. Neither relational distance nor cultural distance seemed to have much traction either way. At the same time, we suspect that a larger sample of cases could reveal a statistically significant effect for cultural distance in the expected direction. The proportion of cases that ended up in violence was higher when the participants were of different ethnicities (42 vs. 28 per cent). Overall, the driver of violent outcomes, in this sample

TABLE 1. *Incident characteristics by nature of the outcome*

	Peaceful resolution <i>n</i> = 21 (64%)	Violent outcome <i>n</i> = 12 (36%)	Effect size ^a
	%	%	
Incident type			0.54*
Fraud—money related	40.0	60.0	
Fraud—drug related	100.0	0.0	
Lost product	33.3	66.7	
Lost product—police	80.0	20.0	
Operational breach	88.9	11.1	
Group type			n.s.
Single-event group	66.7	33.3	
Multiple-event group	61.9	38.1	
Relational distance			n.s.
Internal to organization	60.0	40.0	
External to organization	66.7	33.3	
Cultural distance			n.s.
Same ethnicity	71.4	28.6	
Different ethnicity	57.9	42.1	

^aFisher's exact test used, Cramer's V reported.

* $p < 0.05$; (two tailed).

of cocaine-trafficking disputes, was related to deceitful behaviour involving money, as well as product losses not attributable to police efforts.

The ingredients of a peaceful resolution

Beyond the type of incident, we suspected that there was more to the decision-making involved in turning to violence to resolve grievances. The fact that our data included organizations involved in multiple violent and peaceful incidents provided us with the opportunity to examine cases that were relatively similar in structure (same type of incident and same ringleader) but found different outcomes.

Figure 1 presents the sequence of events for the two most active organizations, Group A 2010A (left) and Group B 2011A (right). These organizations were no more, no less likely than single-event organizations to handle their grievances with violence (Table 1). Yet, a closer reading of the sequences for these two organizations revealed that the difference between a peaceful or violent resolution came down to whether the guilty party (1) accepted blame so that a compensation could be negotiated or (2) provided evidence that can account for product losses—even if the product is never recovered. Group B (right side of Figure 1) is a good example for the latter. The group was involved in five grievances, including two that led to violence: one involving a lost cocaine shipment for which a subordinate importer was blamed, the other being a money dispute where the payment made by a mid-level trafficker to the ringleader was lower than they had agreed upon. In both cases, the ringleader blamed the subordinate directly and showed no tolerance for the failures. For instance, the money dispute occurred when the buyer (a mid-level trafficker) argued that the cocaine he was given (by the ringleader) was of lower quality, which had impacted the price he could sell it for. The ringleader would not admit to this, instead sending other subordinates to rough the buyer up. Peaceful resolutions occurred in the three other cases, when the ringleader

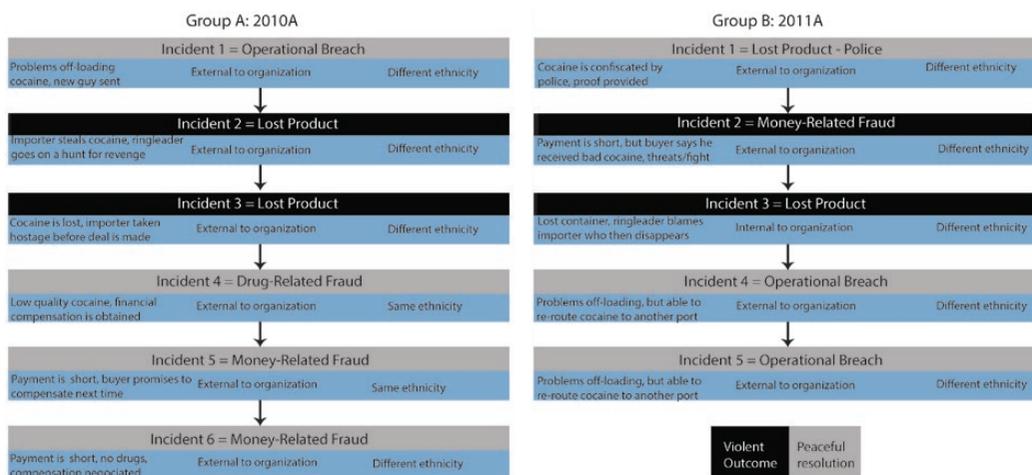


FIGURE 1. Dispute resolution sequence for the two most active groups.

could provide evidence that accounted for the product losses or operational breaches. Specifically, Group B was able to find alternative arrangements (last two cases) or diffuse the blame from the subordinate to the police (first incident). In the latter case, the subordinate that lost the shipment was asked to provide evidence of police involvement, something he was able to do. In contrast, the subordinate involved in the lost product case that led to violence was unable to account for the loss. In the last two incidents for 2011A, tension mounted when the ringleader initially could not account for the shipments or find their location. Yet, violence was avoided when it was discovered that the shipments were sent at the wrong port, which explained the difficulties traffickers had in locating and offloading the drugs (they could not count on their corrupted contacts to facilitate offloading).

Group A 2010A was involved in six events in total, two of which resulted in violence. Here, the fragile balance between a violent or a peaceful outcome rested on the guilty party accepting blame, which opened up the possibility of negotiating an alternative arrangement. The last three cases involving this group all show the same pattern: tensions emerge when the payment is short or the cocaine is found to be of low quality but violence is avoided when blame is accepted and compensations are negotiated. For instance, in the last case of the sequence for Group A, the Colombian exporters refuse to send the cocaine shipment to the Dutch ringleader after he showed up with less money than promised. The authorities intercepted him at the border and confiscated the money he was carrying. His girlfriend was able to pass through with the other portion of the payment. The exporters took the payment from the girlfriend as compensation for their time and troubles. The ringleader let the situation go without violence, even if he ultimately did not receive any drugs in the deal.

None of the ingredients for a peaceful resolution were found in the two incidents that led to violence for this group. In both cases, the cocaine was lost, either through suspected theft or it simply disappeared. The theft is a clear case of a trafficker trying to disappear with a large quantity of drugs being chased around by the ringleader for revenge. The lost cocaine case led to the ringleader being kidnapped by the Colombian exporters, only to

be released once his wife paid a \$300,000 compensation for the lost shipment. Here, compensation was negotiated but only after violence had been initiated through a kidnapping.

Discussion

The data presented above are descriptively interesting. They represent one of the first systematic efforts to describe and analyse the settlement of disputes in the high levels of the drug trade. As in studies of the lower levels of that trade, there is a good deal of variation in how disputes are settled; violence is just one method and not the dominant one. Our use of Donald Black's theory of conflict management was moderately successful. On the one hand, the theory helped us develop a classification of incidents, and gave a useful direction to our coding and reading of the grievances. The coding scheme and terminology used to classify incidents was directly inspired by the theoretical framework. On the other hand, relational and cultural distance, at least as measured in this study, did not emerge as significant predictors of violent outcomes in cocaine-smuggling-related grievances. We urge readers, however, to remember that our sample only contained 12 violent events and to keep investing in systematic coding and analyses in grievances in larger samples. The results, for instance, pointed in the direction of cultural distance possibility being positively associated with violence (42 per cent of incidents involving culturally distinct protagonists resulted in violence).

The data are consistent with a hypothesis that the drug trade, even at this high level, is run in a manner similar to that of any small business. Even though the revenues of these criminal enterprises seem large, in the tens of millions of Euros per annum, they are small businesses in terms of employment, with tens rather than hundreds of employees. Managers in both legal and illegal markets have to make decisions about individuals, either subordinates or transactional partners, that reflect the need to preserve relationships. Indeed, given the impediments to information flows in the cocaine markets, relationships may be even more important than in legal markets (Bouchard 2007). Violence is an option for drug dealers in a way that it is not for legal businesses. However, violence has potentially high costs as a mode for dealing with a grievance, even aside from risks posed by police response to the victimization.

Nonetheless we are surprised that such a high percentage of incidents involved the use of violence. In some cases, the culpable party had acted in an egregious fashion (e.g. money meant for delivering a job is spent for own pleasures), which is not to justify the violence on moral grounds but to suggest that it was not entirely arbitrary and capricious. Cocaine smuggling attracts many individuals who indeed cannot be trusted at all times; their behaviour may reasonably provoke forceful responses, shading into violence. At the same time, it should be remembered that our sampling strategy was purposefully biased towards conflicts among traffickers. The 12 violent incidents we found represents 36 per cent of our sample of conflicts but a much smaller (unknown) proportion among all drug-trafficking transactions of these participants over that period.

A major difference between the violence that we described in this study and the one described by prior studies of street drug dealing pertains to the lethality of the outcome. When cocaine smugglers used violence, it was often for murder. The higher stakes, it seems, may not necessarily increase the frequency of violence or how much ringleaders are willing to tolerate failures. It may, however, increase the likelihood of

murder. The relationship between the likelihood of a lethal outcome and the stakes involved (as measured by money or quantity of cocaine) is an empirical question worth pursuing. In this sample involving only large quantities of cocaine, we could not detect a clear relationship between lethality and the size of the cocaine shipment. We suspect, however, that a sample of grievances that would include a broader range of transaction sizes (include retail transactions) would reveal a clearer relationship. The relatively minor violent incidents described in the street-level conflict management literature could not be reproduced in our study.

Before turning to next steps, we note again the major caveats in using these data for a study of high-level drug dealing. While the sample adds to the literature by providing data on high-level transactions involving European traffickers, there are reasons to be concerned about generalizability. In particular, the Netherlands is a country characterized by low levels of violence. For example, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2019) study of homicide rates shows the Netherlands with a rate of 0.6 per 100,000, close to the Western European average and much lower than the 5.1 rate for the United States, let alone Colombia's extraordinary rate of 33.4. Perhaps, the social and legal environment of the Netherlands makes violent retaliation less attractive. However, note that most of the transactions involve a foreign partner, almost always in the violent Americas and that the ringleaders travel extensively. There are many opportunities for violent resolution outside of the Netherlands. Violent incidents in the cocaine trade appeared to have increased in recent years, after our data collection was completed.⁴ Our data do not account for variations in personalities of traffickers; some may be more prone to violence than others. At the same time, Figure 1 suggests that even traffickers involved in multiple incidents hardly reveal a response style—context is important, and they seem to proceed on case by case basis. Negotiation for a peaceful resolution depended on whether blame was assumed by the guilty party so that a compensation could be negotiated or alternative arrangements could be put into place. In the absence of blame recognition, violence became more likely.

We believe that the creation of a data base of 'grievances' or potential disputes may be a useful innovation for research in this area. Studies that focus only on incidents in which violence is used are always in search of a denominator or measure of context in which to assess the correlates of violence. The use of the grievance as the unit of observation may provide a natural denominator for understanding what triggers violence.⁵ A larger data set would enable an actual test of Black's theory of conflict management (e.g. Phillips 2003).

One theoretical direction coming out of the prior literature pertained to the correlates of a violent resolution of a grievance. The problem with the data in the current study is that we have limited and selective information on many of the incidents. For example, it is very likely that the length of the pre-existing relationship between the

⁴An informal review of these incidents suggest that they fall in the category 'lost product', the category with the highest outcome for violence.

⁵Note though that this is only one source of violence in illegal markets; it covers neither psychopharmacologic nor economic-compulsive violence (Goldstein 1985), which may be hardly relevant for higher-level dealers. Nor does it include territorial violence; territoriality may also be irrelevant for these essentially abstract markets. Reuter (2009), in the context of Mexico, argues that instead of territory, drug-trafficking organizations may be competing for control of key officials. That might apply to Dutch cocaine smugglers, since there is frequent reference to corrupt officials in port and airport facilities. Paoli *et al.* (2013) report a similar issue in Belgium.

parties is an important factor; this information is available for only a few of the incidents. Supplementing these data with interviews with investigators can be helpful but there may still be a significant number of instances in which these data remain unavailable. Absence of evidence of a long-term relationship cannot be equated as evidence of a new relationship.

Conclusion

Our analysis of 33 conflictual incidents at high levels of the drug trade reveals that most disputes are resolved with neither threat nor violence. Grievances arise from frauds, product loss or operational breaches, and the likelihood of violence increased when one party was perceived to have lost the product due to negligence or to have acted fraudulently. Yet, only some types of frauds (money-related frauds and not drug-related frauds) and some types of product losses (non-police related) led to violence. The fragile equilibrium between peaceful or violent resolution depended on the recognition of blame so that solutions could be negotiated.

This is an exploratory study; our sample of high-level wholesale-level transactions remained small for the purposes of statistical inferences. Nonetheless, our study adds to the literature in several ways. First, it provides a classification adapted to disputes in the highest levels of the drug trade. The organizations handle transactions of tens of kilograms of cocaine, valued in many hundreds of thousands of Euros, if not millions. A few exceptions aside, this is a topic often neglected in drug market studies. Losses of that magnitude are harder to 'let go' for many traffickers, which we conjecture increases the lethality of conflicts that do arise. Second, the unit of observation is what [Jacques and Wright \(2008\)](#) would call a potential 'grievance'. We observe thus not just incidents of violence but also those that potentially are violent but are resolved another way. Other scholars describe illustrative non-violent settlement of disputes but do not present a data set that allows potentially for an assessment of the correlates of different paths taken for resolution.

The results have some practical implications for law enforcement agencies. A clear, simple way that agencies may curtail some of the violence associated with police seizures is by timely communicating every drug shipment that they intercepted, including their size. In addition, grievances that are resolved peacefully hint at future transactions between the two parties involved. Violent incidents, on the other hand, may be an indicator that more violence will follow. Agencies can, as we did, create an incident database using intelligence data files to reproduce our analyses. For police agencies, it is useful to know more about what characteristics of drug-trafficking enterprises make them prone to violence. The insights gained can help police better understand the origins of violence in drug markets. This work may help prevent several lethal incidents before they occur.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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